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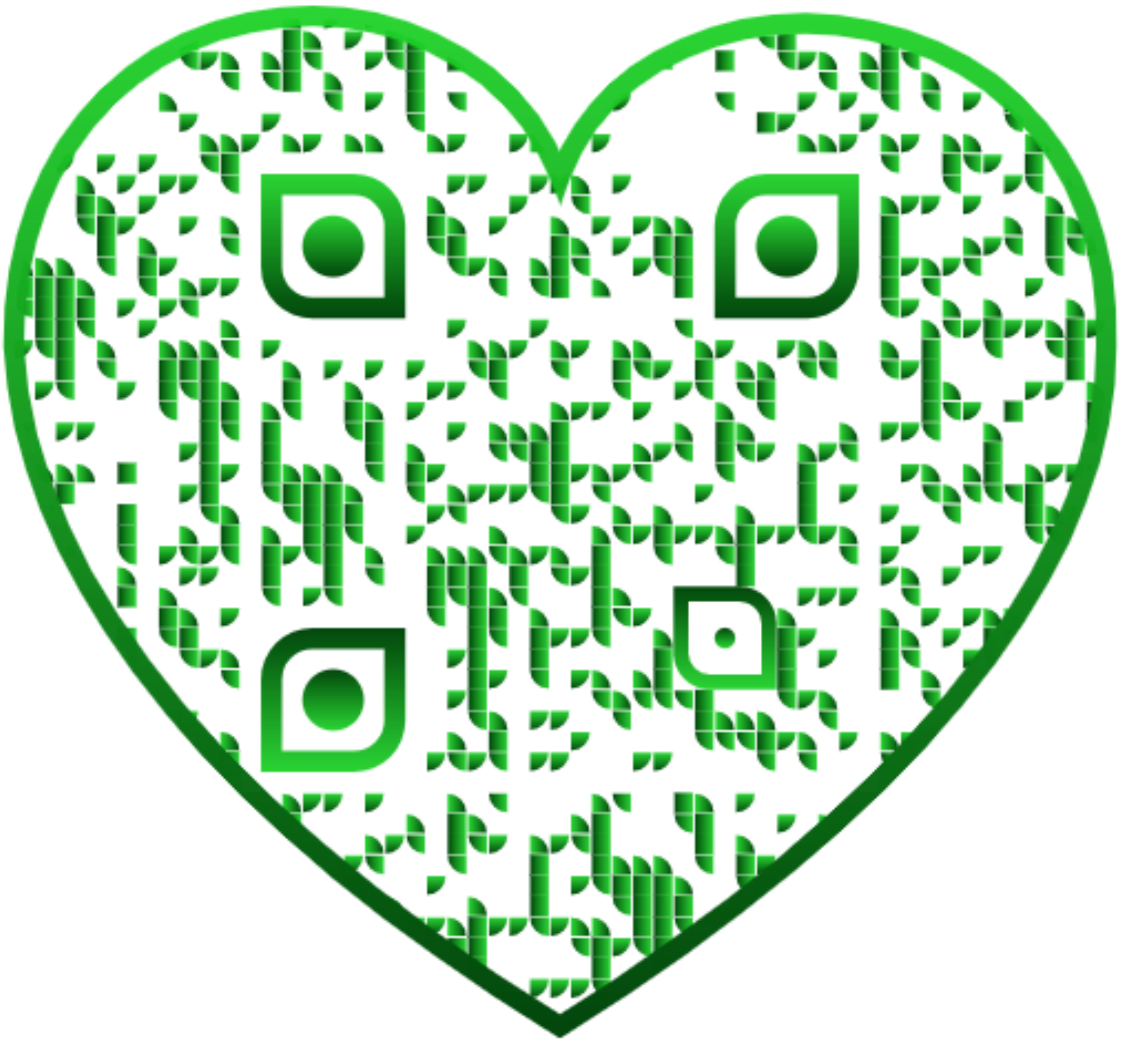
ISSUE 1385

Kristen Stewart

Uncensored



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ISSUE 1385
'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

THE NEW COMEDY ALL-STARS

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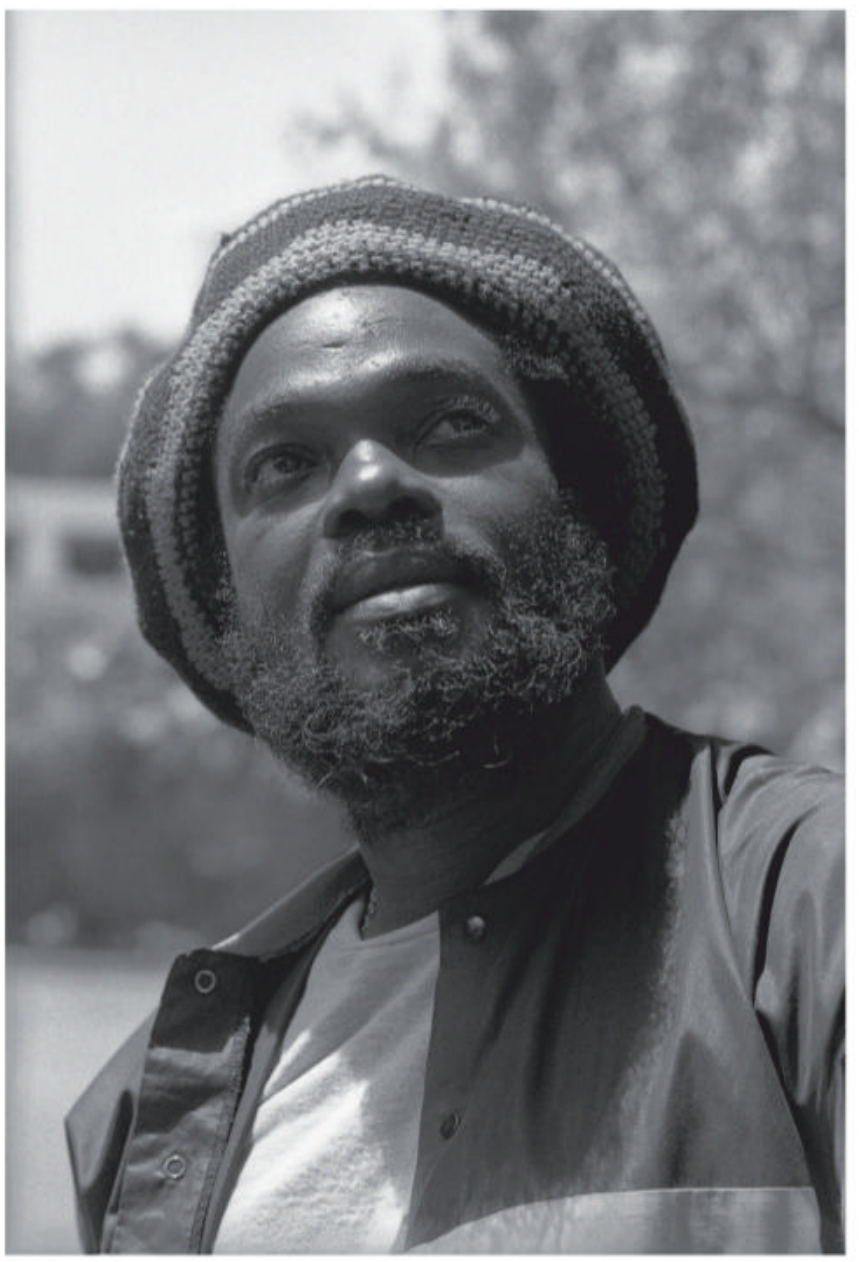
Kristen Stewart photographed in Los Angeles on Jan. 22, 2024, **by Collier Schorr**.

Produced by Rhianna Rule for Palm Productions. Photography direction by Emma Reeves. Styling by Olga Mill for CAA. Hair by Adir Abergel for A-Frame using Virtue Labs. Makeup by Jillian Dempsey for Walter Schupfer Management using Jillian Dempsey. Nails by Ashlie Johnson for the Wall Group. Tailoring by Lydia Jakubowski. Set design by Alex Constable and CJ Keossaian for Maxim Jezek Design. Postproduction by Two Three Two Studio. Location: ESTLR Athletics. Vest by Vena Cava. Jockstrap by Bike Athletics.

1948-2024

Wayne Kramer

When Wayne Kramer first heard Little Richard and Chuck Berry as a kid, his mind was blown. "It spoke to me in a secret, coded language that no one else seemed to pick up on, but I was hearing loud and clear," he told *Rolling Stone* in 2018. He went on to live a truly rock & roll life, from his gloriously unhinged guitar playing with influential proto-punk revolutionaries MC5 to a prison term, years of addiction, and a musical comeback in the Nineties. On Feb. 2, Kramer died at 75 of pancreatic cancer.



1946-2024

Aston 'Family Man' Barrett

Few people did more to redefine pop's groove in the 20th century than Aston Barrett, the Jamaican bassist who served as the rhythmic architect for Bob Marley and the Wailers. "The drum, it is the heartbeat, and the bass, it is the backbone," Barrett once said. "If the bass is not right, the music is gonna have a bad back, so it would be crippled." Fellow reggae bass legend Robbie Shakespeare put it simply: "He's the one who started it all." Barrett died at age 77 on Feb. 3 after a long illness.

FROM TOP: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES; DAVID CORIO/GETTY IMAGES

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Voices *of the* Movement

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ALEXA HUDGENS

Yuli

Yuli is a Grammy-nominated instrumentalist and producer who has worked on records for Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, Doja Cat, and SZA. Her blend of classically trained sensibilities and talent as a producer and artist have made her one of the most in-demand collaborators in the business.

Welcome to Voices of the Movement, a sponsored series presented by Olay Body. Rolling Stone and Olay Body are committed to elevating women who are a force of change in the music industry.

In this series, Olay Body brought together some of the most dynamic and inspiring female leaders from across the music industry to talk about their journeys and how they're fighting for inclusivity and representation. They are mold breakers - women who rose to the top of their occupations and are constantly searching for ways to uplift those just starting out.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STONY JOHNSON

Suni MF

Suni MF is a groundbreaking artist and songwriter from Atlanta, GA who has worked with Flo Milli, Rico Nasty and Sukihanna. She's also appeared on Issa Rae's Max show "Rap Sh!t" performing her viral single "Easy Money".

ROLLING STONE: WHAT DID YOUR JOURNEYS THROUGH THE MUSIC INDUSTRY LOOK LIKE?

SUNI MF: In the 90s, I felt like I always had to bring an extra energy to rapping, because I felt, as a woman, it was a little bit harder starting at the bottom at the open mics and trying to see if you really got what it takes. When there was a woman that went up, everybody would lose interest in her versus a guy.

I remember looking for someone who looked like me on TV, you know, looking for some type of representation. People always used to say Queen Latifah and that is something I felt like I needed just so I could see myself through her.

YULI: The path wasn't clear to me right away because I was trained as a classical musician. When I was younger, I would see people play in an orchestra and wonder what comes after that. Once I got into college and started doing small ensembles and started listening to popular music, I saw people playing and writing in a more commercial space.

That led me into the studio culture. Once I was in the studio, I saw how songs were created. I got a second education after I graduated from college because I was in the studio watching how people put things together. Once I was there, I fell in love and knew it was my path.

ROLLING STONE: HOW HAS REPRESENTATION FOR WOMEN CHANGED DURING YOUR TIME IN THE MUSIC INDUSTRY?

SUNI MF: I think we have great representation now. Now there are all spectrums of women in music. You got all different types of flavors. I used to have to go against people who didn't think a gay female rapper would really thrive. I used to be shocked and appalled. I just didn't understand. I used to have people telling me they didn't think the world was ready for a gay female rapper.

YULI: I feel like there hasn't been a huge shift. Most of the time when I work in a studio, the engineer is a guy, the other producers are guys. It's a boys' club.

But I will say that I've had great experiences when I've done camps that make it a priority to invite women. I did one recently in Nashville and there were a lot of talented female songwriters and artists that I connected with. There's also been more dedicated spaces within the industry where they're like, "Look, we need to tackle this." There are also organizations like Girls Make Beats that I've worked with before. It's a beautiful studio, and they're teaching these little 10- and 11-year-old girls how to DJ and produce and it's dope.

ROLLING STONE: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU GIVE TO YOUNGER WOMEN WHO ARE COMING UP IN MUSIC?

SUNI MF: Spend more time thinking and planning. Have time to think about big ideas. I feel like the more time alone you have, the more time you can really sit and think about what you want versus being pulled this way and that way from the masses or from the influence of social media or from your peers. Success is so different for everybody, and a lot of people try to shove one definition of success down your throat. There are so many ways to make it in the music industry. Success is different for everybody, just like every time you hear a beat or a melody everyone has a different song in their head.

YULI: Number one is to not compare yourself. We're in a social media age. People compare themselves all the time. When you do that, you rob yourself of the opportunity to be you. If you're worried about what everyone else is doing and where they are on their path, it leaves no space for you to figure out what you're about and what your voice is.

You also must be patient with yourself and be patient with the process. You don't know what song is going to hit. You don't know what's going to connect with people. It could be tomorrow, it could be two years from now, it could be a song you made three years ago, you just don't know. When you're so focused on the outcome, you miss the journey and rush yourself •

Women in music have always been forced to look, sound, and act a certain way. But that's changing, and artists like Suni MF and Yuli are at the forefront of that transformation. The work still isn't done, of course, and won't be until women are allowed to bring their entire selves to the stage and recording studio without feeling the pressure of expectations. As Yuli said in our interview, "I would love to see a world where there are prominent artists that are just chilling, being themselves 100%."

Olay Body is committed to exploring the intersection of science and beauty, creating products that reflect every hue and shape. Grounded in their dedication to representation and empowerment, Olay Body is supporting women who are fighting to make their professions more inclusive.

Presented by OLAY BODY

Contributors

COVER STORY

Capturing the Real Kristen Stewart

Stewart and Schorr

Alex Morris
Senior Writer

Alex Morris compares writing about celebrities to going on a blind date — "but unlike a blind date, you can't just leave," she says. Soon after meeting Kristen Stewart for this issue's cover story, she was chugging Coors Lite and swapping book recommendations with the actor. Since 2012, Morris has written about Lorde, Selena Gomez, Halsey, and many others for RS.

Collier Schorr
Photographer

For this issue's cover photo, Kristen Stewart wanted "the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life" (as she recalls in her cover story, p. 30). Renowned photographer Collier Schorr, for whom androgyny is "a natural creative expression," was happy to run with that vision. On the cover, Stewart is subversive and in control, boldly posed in nothing but a black leather vest and a vintage jockstrap. "We both wanted to go deep into iconography and hot-wire it," Schorr says. The New York-based photographer has shot Stewart several times, going back to 2006. "It's so evolutionary, like friendship," Schorr says. "We understand what's at stake. It's the gift of sharing authorship." Schorr has also photographed subjects such as Lana Del Rey, Brie Larson, and Jennifer Lawrence for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Interview Magazine*.

Olga Mill
Stylist

Olga Mill curated the "retro-athletic callback" look that Kristen Stewart rocks on the cover. "So much of being a costume designer is establishing trust," she says of her bond with Stewart, which formed while they worked on the set of *Love Lies Bleeding*. Mill has also worked on *Hereditary* and *Eileen*.

INSIDE THE ISSUE

Funny Business: Covering Comedy in 2024

Meagan Jordan
Writer

When research editor Meagan Jordan spoke to Zainab Johnson (p. 52), she wanted to explore the comedian's experience as a Black Muslim woman. An ardent Christian, Jordan compared notes about faith with Johnson, and found that they share a desire to show the world the best versions of themselves. "Although we believe different things, it's still the same energy," Jordan says.

Maria-Juliana Rojas
Photographer

Colombian-born photo editor Maria-Juliana Rojas aims to honor her subjects' authentic selves in her work. She says this ethos goes back to witnessing her grandmother's battle with Alzheimer's disease: "It became really important to me to figure out how you can capture someone's personality." Rojas unlocked Zainab Johnson's true colors by playing Beyoncé's *Renaissance* at the shoot.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Ariel Sadok**

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: GRIFFIN LOTZ; COURTESY OF OLGA MILL; GRIFFIN LOTZ, 2

Opening Act

Bringing the Weird Art Noise in Brooklyn

WHEN THE BROOKLYN DUO Water From Your Eyes take the stage, their madcap combination of avant-pop loops and deadpan humor can draw a wide range of reactions. "A lot of people come up to the merch table afterwards and they're like, 'Yeah, at the beginning I did not understand what was happening and I did not like it, and by the end I *loved* it,'" says singer Rachel Brown. This year, with tour dates opening for established indie draws like Real Estate and Squid, they've added a live drummer and spent more time than ever practicing. "We're trying to be a little more responsible," adds instrumentalist and producer Nate Amos. "It's an experiment."

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

Touring drummer Bailey Wollowitz, Amos, Brown, and touring guitarist Al Nardo (from left) rehearse at Amos' place in Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Sacha Lecca**

The Best

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

The Evolution of RaiNao

How she faced her fears to become one of Puerto Rico's most exciting and original voices

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Steph Segarra** | **11**

RAINAO

IT STARTED WITH a failed math course. "I failed the same class three times," RaiNao says over Zoom. "The third time, I said, 'No, this is not for me.'" So, around 2014, the singer-songwriter born Naomi Ramirez quit her biology major at the University of Puerto Rico and gave up on her plan to become a surgeon, instead pivoting to a new major in theater arts and audiovisual production. "Theater really helped me learn how to utilize my voice," she says.

A decade later, RaiNao, 29, is one of the most exciting voices in urbano. Her music expertly folds jazz, R&B, and alternative-pop touches into sleek reggaeton, creating a refreshing blend of genres that's all her own. It helps that she's also a trained saxophonist with an ear for sounds that stand out and intrigue. "People take longer to understand if you're not following a trend, but making your own," she says.

Speaking on her lunch break while filming a music video, RaiNao looks otherworldly with winged eyeliner and sparkling lime-green eyeshadow. Her hair is perfectly tousled, a signature blond highlight streaking her dark locks. Two nose piercings punctured with silver hoop rings match the chunky necklace of linked circles across her neck.

She describes her life as being like a line of flicked dominoes falling into place. In fact, the name of her debut album, *Capicú*, refers to a play in the popular Caribbean game. "It's like a win-win," she explains. "No matter what you do, you're winning."

RaiNao has been on a roll since the release of her debut EP, *Ahora A.K.A. Nao*, in early 2022. The EP's inventive approach caught the attention of countless new fans, including Bad Bunny, who shared her alt-perreo earworm "LUV" with his global following on social media – then brought her out for one of his homecoming shows in San Juan on the *Un Verano Sin Ti* tour that summer. In 2023, RaiNao had the audience in Austin begging for an encore at her first SXSW showcase. She gained even more fans last year with two appearances on Puerto Rican producer Mora's album *Estrella*. One by one, the dominoes fell in place toward the much-anticipated release of *Capicú* this year. "Our expectations of [the album] don't matter," she says. "We're going to win regardless, because the most important thing is the process, and the process has been beautiful."

Moving across hyperpop, reggaeton, R&B, drum-and-bass, dancehall, and salsa, *Capicú* sounds like nothing else out right now. Horns trill throughout single "Gualero REFF12.31," creating a smooth accent to the song's insistent bongos. RaiNao loves experimenting with new sounds; lately, she says, she's been into the "funky and weird" percussive rhythms heard at Brazilian Carnival celebrations. But her favorite part of making music is writing her clever, evocative lyrics. "I think there's a magic in using words in a way that only you can," she says.

Raised in Santurce, a San Juan neighborhood filled with murals and a booming arts and club scene, RaiNao grew up surrounded by music. Her father held side gigs singing in salsa bands like Pete "El Conde" Rodríguez's. "My dad chased [a career] in music very passionately, all of his life," she says.

RaiNao loved music, too, but she was a shy kid, to the point that she felt terrified of singing in public. The one exception was in front of the audience at her family's church. "I knew I *could* sing because I would sing in the shower and at church," she says. "I wasn't scared because it was the same people every Sunday." Even so, when she tried out for the Escuela Libre de Música, a prestigious music school, RaiNao opted for the saxophone instead of vocals. "I'm sure there's a lot of my friends who are still like, 'WTF, what is she doing?' because I never opened myself up to explore my voice before," she says.

Her anxiety was a serious issue in her teens. "I would get panic attacks," she says, adding that she was once hospitalized during a mental-health crisis. Over time, she learned to quiet her fears of the future, but even then, a career in music seemed like an impossible dream. "I always wanted it, but I never dared to start, because it's hard to make a living out of art," she says. When she told her dad about her plan to switch majors in college, he offered a word of caution about going all in on music. ("You can do both things at the same time," she remembers him saying.)

Just before the pandemic shut down the world in 2020, RaiNao said "Fuck it" and uploaded her first YouTube video: a reggae-infused cover of Puerto Rican salsa singer Víctor Manuelle's "He Tratado." She followed that up with a string of original singles, holding live sessions online occasionally as a way to connect with fans. Her 2021 song "Me Fui" made its way to Sonar, a new label founded by Puerto Rican powerhouse Rimas Music that year with the goal of platforming rising artists. A biting breakup anthem that traverses jazz, rock, and reggaeton, "Me Fui" showcased the best of RaiNao, and soon she had a deal.

Today, RaiNao sounds confident and sure of herself. "We have today to give it our all," she says. "We have to do it *right now*" – which is, of course, a play on her stage name. She chose it by riffing off a nickname ("Nao," for Naomi), which became an online username before taking on new meaning when she started what she calls her "life project." In the Bad Bunny-approved "LUV," RaiNao puts it perfectly: "*¿A que esperar? Mejor RaiNao.*" ("Why wait? It's better RaiNao.")

RaiNao doesn't shy away from exploring vulnerable emotions on *Capicú*. With "Naomi's Interlude," she refers to her past mental-health struggles with the intent of reminding listeners that they're not alone. "I've learned to control it," she says of her anxiety. How exactly? "I really can't do anything other than to make my music and create my reality the way I want to."

Alongside fellow Puerto Rican up-and-comers like Villano Antillano and Young Miko, RaiNao has started a revolution in the male-dominated genre of urbano music – not just with her mix of genres, but with her loudly queer lyrics and unapologetic presence. "We are doing something unprecedented," she says. Not only are she and her peers reinventing the scene on the island, they're blazing a path for new generations to come. "It's really mind-blowing to be a source of inspiration for others who want to dare themselves to do it," RaiNao says.

And she's not going to stop there. This year, RaiNao is out for world domination. "I want to eat the whole world," she says, narrowing her black-rimmed eyes. "And bit by bit, I'll do it." **MAYA GEORGI**

FAST FACTS

INKED
RaiNao uses a drawing of an hourglass as a logo for her music. Both of her parents got tattoos of the symbol.

GETTING STARTED
Early in her career, RaiNao was a backup singer for her college classmate (and fellow urbano artist) Rafa Pabon.

VIDEO STAR
Last year, she starred in the video for Tainy's single "La Baby" along with Becky G, Camila Cabello, PaoPao, and others.

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY KAMILA PINERO. STYLING BY DANIELA FABRIZI. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY KARLA SÁNCHEZ.

ART

Radical Visions From Japan

Influential artist Daidō Moriyama's striking black-and-white images from the 1980s come to life in a new book and gallery show

By EMMA REEVES

IN THE YEARS following the 1972 publication of his seminal book *Farewell Photography,* Japanese photographer Daidō Moriyama became severely depressed. He moved out of Tokyo, became reliant on sleeping pills, and lost so much weight he was down to 88 pounds at one point. He did not pick up his camera for seven years. It was only when Akira Hasegawa, the editor of a new photography magazine, *Shashin Jidai,* proposed an interview that Moriyama allowed himself to reengage with the creative world. What followed was a series of six extraordinary photo essays with poetic titles published from 1981 to 1988.

Late last year, a beautifully designed book celebrating these photo essays was co-published by Dashwood Books and Session Press. Dashwood founder and publisher David Strettell, in association with consultant Miwa Susada, saw the importance of memorializing these radical photographic experiments. "It's an extraordinary story of the power of art as a form of therapy," Strettell says. "Moriyama was given a free hand to explore and experiment. In the process, he was able to create a new aesthetic." Describing Moriyama as "the most important Japanese artist of the postwar period," he adds: "His style of hyper-contrasty black-and-white and violent compositions created a film-noir sensibility … almost a hardcore-jazz soundtrack that has influenced generations of photographers both in the West as well as Japan."

The *Shashin Jidai* photo essays are also part of the inaugural exhibition at Dashwood Projects, a new gallery in New York's East Village that will open this month. One additional complexity is that most of the negatives have been lost. "All that remains are the magazine tear sheets for many of these stories," Strettell says.

LIGHT AND SHADOW

The first photo essay in the collection, "Light and Shadow," was published in the fall of 1981, marking Moriyama's return to photography. "Much of 'Light and Shadow' is Daidō taking photographs of objects around the beach town of Zushi, and Tokyo and its suburbs," Strettell and Susada write. "This image of the soda bottle was not one we were familiar with, symbolizing modern Japan and the influence of Western culture."

TOKYO

Moriyama published this stark image of a horse in the snow in early 1984 as part of a series of photos themed around the seasons of a year. "He begins this chapter exploring the boundaries of Tokyo, then halfway through, documents a series of trips taken seasonally around Japan as a counterpoint to the capital city," Strettell and Susada write. "This one is from a 'Winter Trip' to the northern island of Hokaido."

A JOURNEY TO NAKAJI

"Yasui Nakaji was a leading light in the Japanese avant-garde that explored modernism and surrealism in the 1930s," Strettell and Susada write, noting that Moriyama's journey toward one of his artistic heroes in this photo essay was "a spiritual one." "These photograms — a form of cameraless photography — refer to the work of the French surrealist Man Ray and his 'Rayographs' that would have influenced Nakaji," they add.

DOCUMENTARY

"Daidō decided to quite literally document everything he came across for this chapter," Strettell and Susada write. "Subjects varied wildly, from street photography to cars, insects, flowers, natural landscapes, and portraiture. The photo we selected here is an unknown one — taken in Shibuya, the busy neighborhood of Tokyo — that typifies the style of street photography he became known for at this time and into the Nineties."

HOW TO CREATE A BEAUTIFUL PICTURE

By 1987, Moriyama was back in prime form, even opening a private gallery in Shibuya. "In this chapter, published between December '86 and February '88, Daidō playfully explores all sorts of experimental aspects of photography," Strettell and Susada write. "Like a puzzle, this is part of a series of crops from a single photograph with a large, complex composition.... The full photograph is revealed at the end of the essay."

LETTER TO MYSELF

The final *Shashin Jidai* photo essay collected in the book has a quiet, reflective tone. "My photos are not outward messages toward others, nor are they made with the viewer in mind," Moriyama wrote in 1988. "Ultimately, they are oriented toward myself." Strettell and Susada describe this chapter as "an introspective set of essays and photographs, exemplified by this interior image of an unmade bed, with a sliver of open curtain."

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DAIDŌ MORIYAMA VIA DASHWOOD BOOKS/SESSION PRESS

SIX TIMES THE FUN
Ortega, Peña, Cantú, Guerrero, Solis, and Acosta (clockwise from top left)

PROFILE

Romantic Rebels on the Rise

Grupo Frontera became stars by reinventing traditional norteño, and they've got more to come

By TOMÁS MIER

IF YOU ASK the members of Grupo Frontera how they've become such a phenomenon in música Mexicana, they'll probably say they're just having fun. "Cumbias, I don't want to say we revived them," says vocalist Payo Solis, looking hesitantly at his bandmates at first. Then he adds, "But when we started playing them, it gave the genre a whole new life."

Over the past year, the Texas band has rocketed to the top of Latin music, even joining Bad Bunny onstage at Coachella 2023 for a rendition of their collaboration, "Un x100to." On their debut LP, *El Comienzo*, the group – comprising Solis, drummer Carlos Guerrero, guitarist Beto Acosta, percussionist Julian Peña, accordionist Juan Javier Cantú, and bassist Brian Ortega – tapped into a generation's nostalgia for the accordion-backed norteño sound of the early 2000s, but modernized it through snappy lyricism about love in the modern age. It's a thoroughly fresh spin on a familiar genre that keeps the romantic essence at its core.

Like the album title suggests in Spanish, the project was a thrilling start for Frontera. And lately the group has been building on that foundation by experimenting in the studio, merging its signature style with muted drums, synths, and even steel guitars that bring George Strait to mind. "We were trying *everything* this time around," Peña says.

Part of that genre exploration came from Frontera's producer, Edgar Barrera, who's behind some of the biggest hits by Karol G, Don Omar, and Marc Anthony. "On *El Comienzo,* he wrote the songs but did our style. On this album, we let him flow with his musical ideas," Guerrero says. "He'd be like, 'You're down to do that?' And we really were. We really let him experiment."

At times, Solis adds, "we were skeptical and thought, 'How's this going to sound?' But honestly, we jam out to every song on the new album."

With only a few years under their belt, Frontera are just getting acclimated with the *desmadre* of the industry. They intend to take full advantage of the boom that música Mexicana is having right now, and they're close with many of the artists blowing up within the genre, including Peso Pluma and Carin Leon. "The cool thing about being friends with them is we understand each other," says Peña. "We can skip the small talk and get more intimate: 'What's going on with your tour?' "

After getting their start performing at weddings and quinceañeras in their native Rio Grande Valley, Grupo Frontera have built a deep connection as bandmates. When they spoke to ROLLING STONE, the group had just reunited after a two-week break.

"Right now, we're crying over here," says Peña. "You can only be apart from your brother for so long. If we hated each other, we couldn't make this happen."

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Gustavo Soriano**

Why This Might Be Ariana Grande's Boldest Era Yet

The pop star is gloriously unpredictable – and it feels like she wants to play in a historic league with stars like Madonna

ROB SHEFFIELD
SOUND AND VISION

ARIANA GRANDE has built such a mighty pop legacy over the past decade as one of the most consistently kicky hitmakers around – but also as one of the weirdest minds in the game. "Yes, And?" is her Number One comeback, a disco rage-queen anthem that raises expectations for her long-awaited return, *Eternal Sunshine*. It's a brilliantly nasty manifesto to kick off the new Ariana era. She's just hit her thirties, wrapping up her Saturn return, and she's making music after a four-year layoff. But she's got some nonholistic shit to talk about to anyone gossiping about her between albums. "Don't comment on my body, do not reply," Ari sneers. "Your business is yours and mine is mine/Why do you care so much whose dick I ride?"

Madonna, one of Grande's idols, is the guiding spirit of "Yes, And?," which rides a "Vogue"-style house beat. It's a clever salute to the queen, who invented this power move of reminding people how controversial you are by complaining how controversial you are. But it's also a spiritually perfect shout-out at a pivotal time for Grande. She's 30, around the age when Madonna made her big move into the future with *Like a Prayer,* the album that catapulted her into one of the most dizzyingly brilliant thirties any pop artist ever had. So for Grande to invoke "Vogue," right from Madonna's change-of-decade moment, feels like a bold statement about her ambitions – she wants to play in that historic league. Thirtysomething Madonna had it both ways: sophisticated mega-pop depth and disco bombast. Why shouldn't Ariana?

The stakes are high for *Eternal Sunshine*. Grande set the tone by posting a credo for the new year. "I've never felt more at the mercy of and in acceptance of what life was screaming to teach me," she wrote. Life has been screaming so much wisdom at Ariana, and she's finally ready to share. After four years, she's got a lot to prove.

Grande has alway been gloriously unpredictable. When she first made her bones as a real-deal star, it was 10 years ago with her 2014 breakout hit, "Problem," and her album *My Everything*. But she came on like a trash-talking kid playing grown-up. Everything about her seemed hyperbolically over-the-top: her Bardot ponytail, her mini-Mariah pipes, her mascara-dripping eye rolls, her perpetually bored scowl of teen contempt. Ten years down the line, she's proved she'll try anything for kicks. She does glossy ballads, Euro-sleaze dance bangers, hip-hop sex rants, trap *Sound of Music* – but it all sounds like her. She broke up with Pete Davidson, rushed out a quickie called "Thank U, Next," and shocked everyone with one of the decade's most indelible classics.

Eternal Sunshine is her first new music since her 2020 banger, *Positions,* the ultimate pandemic-era perv-disco concept album about quarantine madness: a couple locked in the house together so long there's nothing to do but destroy the furniture in a nature-is-healing sex frenzy. Future historians will pair *Positions* with *Folklore* as the yin and yang of lockdown culture, two experimental pop classics lost in cabin fever. *Positions* holds up insanely well; it sounds better every year. But it's been a long stretch since the "34+35" days. "You such a dream come true, true/Make a bitch wanna hit snooze, ooh" – those were different times.

Her snooze era was a surprisingly long break for any pop star these days, but especially for Grande, after her bang-bang-bang prolific run of *Sweetener*, *Thank U, Next,* and *Positions*. The faster she worked, the more off-the-dome and eccentric she went, the higher she peaked; her best-loved moments came when she talked her shit and hit send before anyone had time to talk her out of it. But in her years away, her only new music was occasional cameos on other people's remixes, while filming the upcoming *Wicked* movies, starring as Glinda. She also made headlines with her marriage, divorce, and on-set romance with co-star Ethan Slater, which gets her rage going on "Yes, And?"

KEVIN WINTER/IHEARTMEDIA/GETTY IMAGES

In case anyone forgot those scandals – let's face it, we've all had so many others to keep track of – it's a clever move to kick off her *Eternal Sunshine* era with a lead single giving a "previously on Ariana" recap. She's always had her own flair for surfing her way through the tabloid headlines – that's how we got "Thank U, Next," where she turned what could have been the pettiest celebrity shade into a genuinely moving pop life-coach lesson, her most unexpectedly wise homily. But this woman always knows how to embrace controversy, going all the way back to the most iconic crisis of her career, her legendary doughnut-licking scandal of 2015, when she outraged a nation by getting rowdy in a late-night bakery, tasting the goodies and saying, "I hate America." (Damn it, we need a revival of pop-star pastry dramas.) It was the power move of a true havoc queen.

Eternal Sunshine takes its title from the 2004 Michel Gondry drama about a heartbroken couple who can only move on by getting each other's lives medically erased from their brains. It suggests Ariana has got some bittersweet memories to purge. She teams up with longtime collaborators Max Martin and Ilya Salmanzadeh, a symbolic full-circle moment, since they were on hand for her coronation with "Problem" and *My Everything* a decade ago. Entering their thirties is often a moment when pop queens get introspective and decide to make their boldest marks on history – Carole King on *Tapestry,* Janet Jackson on *The Velvet Rope,* Taylor Swift on *Lover,* Joni Mitchell on *Hejira,* and, of course, Madonna going full-blast into Damn Right I'm Expressing Myself Thanks for Asking mode. So it's a huge moment for Ariana. Over her amazing past decade, she's explored pretty much everywhere. But *Eternal Sunshine* is where she shows the world where she's ready to go next. ®

PROFILE

Her Podcast Pissed Off the Internet. She's Back for More

Bobbi Althoff's 'Very Good Podcast' made her an online villain – but now she's coming clean

By CT JONES

RUNNING A parody account on TikTok, Bobbi Althoff knew her dream of making the transition to a celebrity interviewer was missing one key component: celebrities. So she put out a request to her followers: She would give $300 to whomever could connect her to a famous person willing to be on her podcast. One fan got her comedian Rick Glassman. Another led her to Funny Marco. In these interviews, her audience got their first glimpse of Althoff's shtick: a deadpan, absurdist antagonism, part Zach Galifianakis on *Between Two Ferns,* part cringe Gen Z interrogation. Her next guest didn't even require a finder's fee. Instead, she wrote a DM to the five-time Grammy-winning (and notoriously elusive) rapper Drake. Three days later, they were filming a podcast episode in Drake's bed.

"The rise was rapid and a lot to take in. Everything happened so quickly," says Althoff, 26. In less than three months, she went from a podcaster willing to throw around cash for guests to a well-known interviewer with 11 million followers and access to some of the biggest names in entertainment – like Shaquille O'Neal, Mark Cuban, Jason Derulo, and Offset. But with that popularity came a rigorous debate online, one that turned clips of *The Really Good Podcast* viral – and Althoff into an internet villain. Now, she's not just back with a new season, but also with a new attitude toward the limelight.

Althoff is Zooming from outside her California home, sitting in her car, which she jokingly refers to as her office. She's quick to mention that if she ducks, it's to keep her young daughter from seeing her and presumably wanting to join in. (She has two daughters, ages one and three.) "My children are mommy magnets," Althoff explains. "If they could crawl back into my womb, they both would go."

Parenting isn't just the job she finds the most rewarding, it's also what kickstarted Althoff's internet fame. In 2021, Althoff developed a devoted fan base for her "bad mom" parody videos, sharing stories about spending on her husband's credit card or refusing to let her children have toys that didn't match her aesthetic.

Her audience followed her to her podcast, and after the Drake interview, she booked bigger and bigger guests. But as her star power grew, so did the critiques. Where did Althoff's access come from? Was she an industry plant, a white woman taking gigs from Black hip-hop journalists? By last August, Althoff was the topic of thousands of tweets and articles after asking Offset if that was "his real name," or Glassman if his parents were rich. People called her rude, untalented, unfunny, and accused her of being a nepo baby or worse, simply another influencer wasting everyone's time. The opinions were everywhere – and Althoff read almost every one. And then she had to log off.

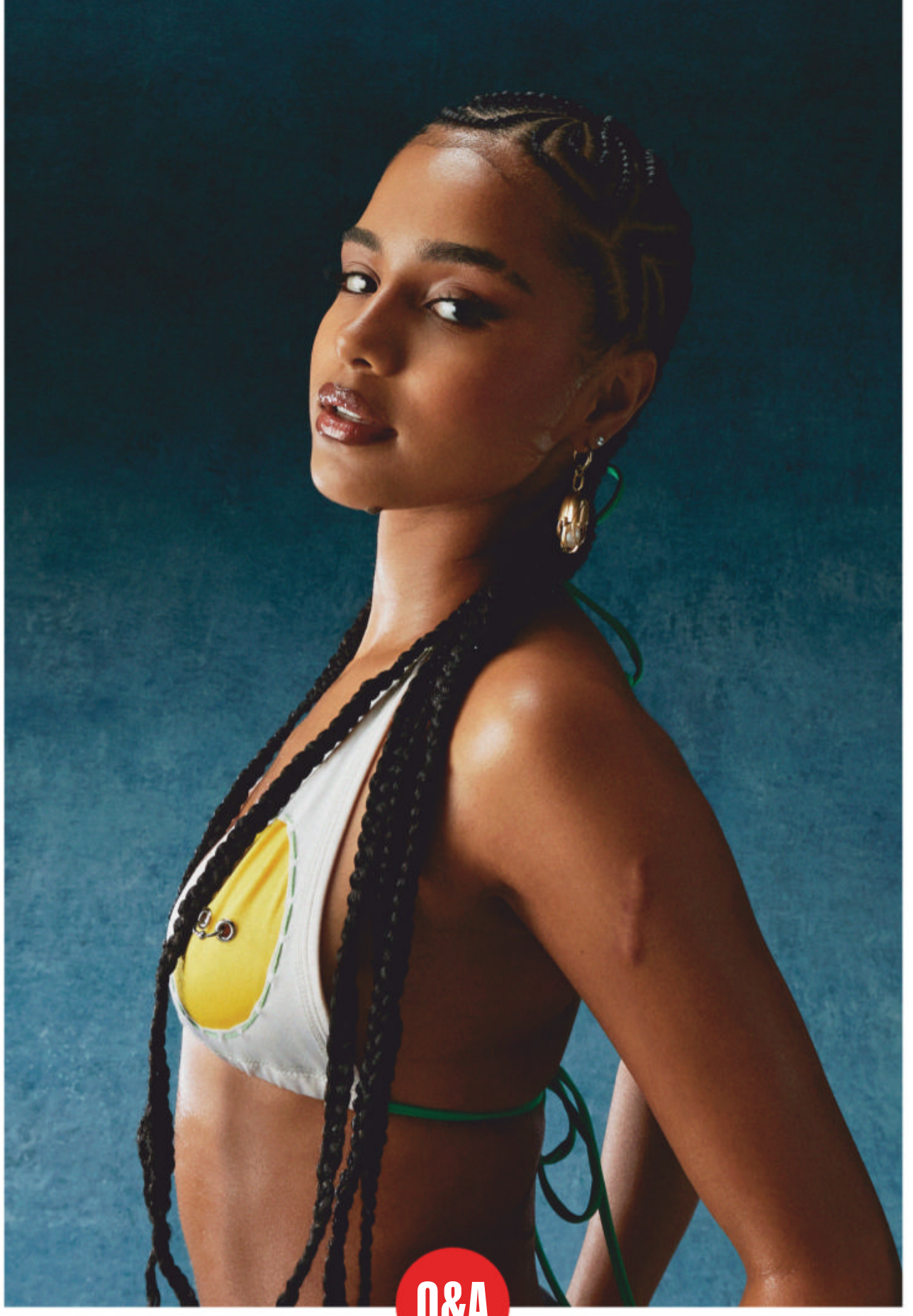
"A lot of people didn't get that it was a bit," Althoff says. "I think a lot of people think I'm just this mean person who says mean things to people. That's why I'm trying to make sure people know there's a difference between the interviewer me versus the real me."

While she braved the worst of it, Althoff says that her 15 minutes of fame also led to some mistakes. For instance, she went with a friend to get a round of filler in her face, which she immediately regretted. "I got L.A.-ified. It was awful," Althoff says, laughing. Althoff can laugh at the incident now, but it also makes her grateful for the aspects of her life that she kept private before the fame. "With kids, you're literally wearing your heart outside of your body. And then you combine that with social media and you're just a mess," Althoff says. "My mental health did struggle a lot in the last few months, but I got put on an anxiety medication and that changed my life. I have never felt better."

"I'm trying to make sure people know there's a difference between the interviewer me and the real me," Althoff says.

For the new season, Althoff booked guests including Bobby Flay, Rainn Wilson, and Andrew Santino. And she tells ROLLING STONE that she's determined to make the most of her spotlight. "With my podcast, at least I know that it's something I have fun with, it has fans, and I know that the guests have fun doing it," Althoff says. "I couldn't do this without the people in my life. Because none of that [online] matters. What's in my house is what matters."

DAVIS BATES



Q&A

Tyla

The South African pop star on staying true to herself, dancing all night, and her Belieber past

By LARISHA PAUL

WHEN TYLA WAS making her hit single "Water," she had a simple goal in mind. "I just wanted a summer song that everybody could vibe to and have fun to," the South African singer told ROLLING STONE last year. "The meaning of the song is frisky: It's me letting a guy know, 'Show me what you got to offer. I'm done with all the talk.' "

Her plan worked, to the tune of 382 million Spotify streams, the first-ever Grammy Award for Best African Music Performance, and a career with as much forward momentum as anyone's in 2024. As she readies her debut album, *Tyla*, she is still set on making you sweat, making you hotter – and making you remember what it's like to watch a pop star rise to the top.

She's also trying to rewrite some narratives in the music industry. "A lot of artists have shown love for African music and African culture, which is amazing, but I'd love to see a lot more African artists showcasing that and being at the forefront of it," Tyla, 22, tells ROLLING STONE now over Zoom. The record – which features star-studded collaborations with Gunna and Tems, among others – is the culmination of years of work, despite what Tyla's apparent overnight success might lead you to believe.

She'd like to create a "perfect blend" between African and Western music. "Pop stardom is just being huge – huge songs, huge influence, and making history, and being remembered for something," Tyla says.

That's why she's capturing every moment for future documentaries; championing amapiano, South Africa's globally popular house-music style; and doing her best to manifest potential pop collaborations with the likes of Drake and Justin Bieber. "When I listen to the album, I'm so proud of it," she says. "I just see our sound going so far: the culture, the words, the slang. Even just Joburg – the thought of people now singing about Joburg."

JEREMY SOMA

You started posting on TikTok in March 2020, and now you're releasing your debut album in March 2024. Looking back over those four years, what was the greatest lesson that you learned?
Basically just to trust in myself and be patient. Because even though I knew that the day would come because of God – I love God, and I love praying – and even though I had a feeling that this was my calling and it was gonna come, naturally, there were days where I would doubt. I'd be like, "When is it going to happen? Is it going to happen? Is it not meant for me?"

You've been influenced by Rihanna, and you're frequently compared to her. It seems like people have nostalgia for what it *felt like* to first experience Rihanna in the 2000s, more than your actual sound. How do you feel about that comparison?
I love it. I feel like I understand it completely, because I've felt that way as well. I could have easily just sang pop, or easily just sang whatever. But I really wanted to make something new and fresh and bring something different to the industry. That's what I strive to do, with literally everything that I do when it comes to video, music, vibe, clothing, everything. I love that people feel like it's nostalgic *and* a breath of fresh air.

Even going by your first name has a star quality about it. Rihanna, Beyoncé, Zendaya, Madonna. What statement are you making by having your first record be self-titled?
It's my introduction, so I just wanted it to be easy: *Tyla*. Plain and simple, letting people know I'm here. This is me. This is what I'm coming with. I really wanted to give a statement because I think that shows confidence, and I'm just ready. I've been working on this for so long. And even though people think I just [arrived] a few weeks ago, I've literally been working for very long on this. Self-titled was the only way for my first album.

You've talked about making a time capsule of your life right now, saving those moments to remember. How do you approach that?
I'm very much a big dreamer, and I believe that if I act as if I got something already, it will come to me. So we are always shooting everything and anything, and we always say years from now, when we do a Tyla documentary, this will be so good.

Some people might be like, "Girl, you're not going to get a documentary." But I don't know, everything is about feeling, and I feel like this is gonna go crazy. I love old digital cameras, film cameras, and things that look old – but also still things that are new, because you never know. Years from now, iPhone footage may look ancient.

Do you have a favorite pop documentary?
Beyoncé's, obviously. But then also I really like Katy Perry's and Justin Bieber's. I used to be a huge Belieber – oh, my word.

He's also someone who has dabbled outside of the pop world. He even had Burna Boy on his most recent album.
I have to meet him at least once. He definitely has shown love to African music and African culture, especially with the remix of [WizKid and Tems'] "Essence" and all of that. I can tell that he really enjoys that vibe. And I mean, he's always explored in his career. So maybe there'll be a Justin Bieber and Tyla song.

SKIP THE MEAL PREP SCARIES WITH STOUFFER'S SIDES.

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Tyla onstage in 2023

"Parties close way too early in America. Why are you guys going home at 2 a.m.? Our parties go till whenever."

You've been manifesting a Drake collaboration, too. Which of the many eras of Drake would you most want to work with?
Yo, every era is so good. I really enjoyed his album *More Life*. That was an album that I kept playing because it was also very dance-y and had South African vibes in it. You know, like "Passionfruit," "Get It Together." That's the type of vibe. I feel like we could create something fire.

What's the biggest difference between parties in America and South Africa?
Firstly, parties close way too early in America. Why are you guys going home at 2 a.m.? Our parties go till whenever – some people leave at 1 p.m. the next day. In America, I feel like the parties are more for networking than partying. In South Africa, it's literally purely just to dance. Everyone is dancing.

What if you go out somewhere and the music isn't hitting? Do you try to make the most of it anyway?
If I'm with friends, then we can make the party by ourselves in our own section and we'll be fine. But if you're just going out and it's dry, I'd rather be home. I'm not really a party girl, so I won't force anything.

That message of putting yourself first appears a few times on your album. How do you decide which opportunities to say no to in order to put yourself first, while still maintaining your momentum?
Health, as well as happiness, are so important. I'm happy that I have a team that never pressures me into doing anything that I don't want to do. At the end of the day, that's it. This is a job, you know? It's not really my life. I feel like some people lose that when they stretch themselves further than they need to.

Being one of the first South Africans to make pop hits in this era means having your identity be somewhat unfamiliar to Western audiences. We saw that last year with commentary around how the word "coloured" functions differently in the context of America (where it's seen as a slur) versus South Africa (where it's used to refer to people of mixed heritage). How did you prepare for that cultural gap?
Obviously, things will come and it'll be out of your control, because you are now in the public eye, and you are introducing people to new things. Because of where I'm from, that's gonna happen regardless. I'm just here being Tyla, creating what I create, and not really trying to start anything. I can understand both sides of the arguments. I just feel like I want the focus to be on the music, not really what race I am.

You have a feature with Tems on the album. Are there things you've been able to bond over, or confide in each other about?
We have the same goals in terms of spreading our sound and our culture to the world and dominating the industry. Also being two girls from Africa breaking down walls, we're very much supportive. I'm happy that we were able to create something so pretty with a good message. It's just cool that we're both African girls doing it.

What are you hoping to accomplish in the next four years?
I'm hoping that more people get tuned in and they see what we have to offer, because we're really just taking it to a different level. I don't think people understand the plans that we have. Everything that I'm planning on doing and the music and the culture and everything that's coming with it ... it's bigger than people think.

TYLER GOLDEN/NBC

WHEN DINNER DREAD HITS, THE ANSWER IS MEATYCHEESY.

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RS REPORTS

Trapped at O'Hare

Angi and her family left Venezuela for a better life in the States. But after Texas Gov. Greg Abbott put them on a plane to Chicago, they and so many others were stuck in limbo at the airport

By ELLY FISHMAN

IT'S JUST PAST 11 A.M. on Christmas Eve, and Angimar leans forward in a blue, perforated metal chair to examine her toddler's diaper. The boy has been tugging at his legging pants, and his walk is now more of a waddle. Along with most personal-hygiene products, diapers are in short supply. Within a few seconds, 28-year-old Angimar, who goes by Angi, makes a quick calculation, the kind that mothers of young children make hundreds of times each day. It's time, she decides, for a new one.

Angi asks Yenni, the eldest of five children whose ages range from two to nine, to retrieve a plastic cup that she's stashed with their belongings. As Yenni jogs across the room, she passes a stretch of full-height windows that showcase oversize, twinkling wreaths and bright red bows that offer a dose of seasonal cheer. Butted up against them sit a collection of inflatable mattresses strewn with blankets, backpacks, and clothing. Together, the beds form an organic shape, one that has grown around the room's more permanent fixtures – a Pepsi vending machine, a Bank of America ATM, rows of chairs bolted to the floor. A small group hovers around a tangle of phone cords that protrude from a charging station. One man smiles at a pixelated video. He waves and says "Feliz Navidad" to the girl on the screen.

When Yenni returns with the cup, Angi takes it and pulls her son toward the public restroom. Before she disappears into the multi-stall bathroom, Angi passes a uniformed man who leans against a janitorial cart. With an arm wrapped around the mop handle, he nods to Angi. He's already cleaned the bathroom once this morning, and he'll return several more times throughout the day. This one in particular, in comparison with the others the man cleans during his shift, demands extra care.

Hovering over the sink, Angi fills the flimsy plastic cup with water and dips paper towels in it to create an approximation of a wet wipe, which are also hard to find. She'll come back to this same faucet several times throughout the day. It's also her bath, shower, and laundry basin. Once finished, Angi, who moves at an unhurried pace, emerges to find her boys in the middle of a cutthroat soccer game. Her dark brown eyes, framed by sharp eyebrows, look tired. She brushes a strand of her wavy, dark hair from her neck, a gesture that reveals a "Daniel" tattoo inked in cursive writing. As the trio play, passing around the ball, they never once look at the large sign in the corner of the room. It's a map of O'Hare International Airport, and on it, a small dot toward the center of the illustration reads "You are here."

WHEN SHE ARRIVED in Chicago in late 2023, Angi, whose last name ROLLING STONE is withholding due to her precarious immigration status, joined the recent wave of migrants who have landed in the city since August 2022. Most arrived here on buses sent by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott who, in a campaign to push the Biden administration to secure the southern border, bussed tens of thousands of migrants from Texas to large Democratic cities – New York, Los Angeles, and Denver, among others. In a January press release trumpeting the success of what Abbott calls "Operation Lone Star," the Texas governor celebrated transporting more than 100,000 migrants. Abbott has sent 12,500 to Washington, D.C., another 15,700 migrants to Denver, and 30,800 to Chicago. (Chicago is second only to New York City, where 37,100 migrants have arrived on buses and trains since August 2022.)

So far, the city of Chicago has spent $138 million on migrant assistance and committed an additional $150 million in 2024. In total, the state of Illinois had spent

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Camila Guarda**

GUTTER PHOTO CREDIT

MAKING DO
Two of Angi's children keep themselves busy in the airport terminal that became their home.

or committed $638 million by November 2023. But even with hundreds of millions of dollars directed at the crisis, Chicago has struggled to support the steady flood of people. This has proven especially true when it comes to housing. Ever since the first buses carrying migrants arrived in Chicago, the question of where to house people has been a contentious one.

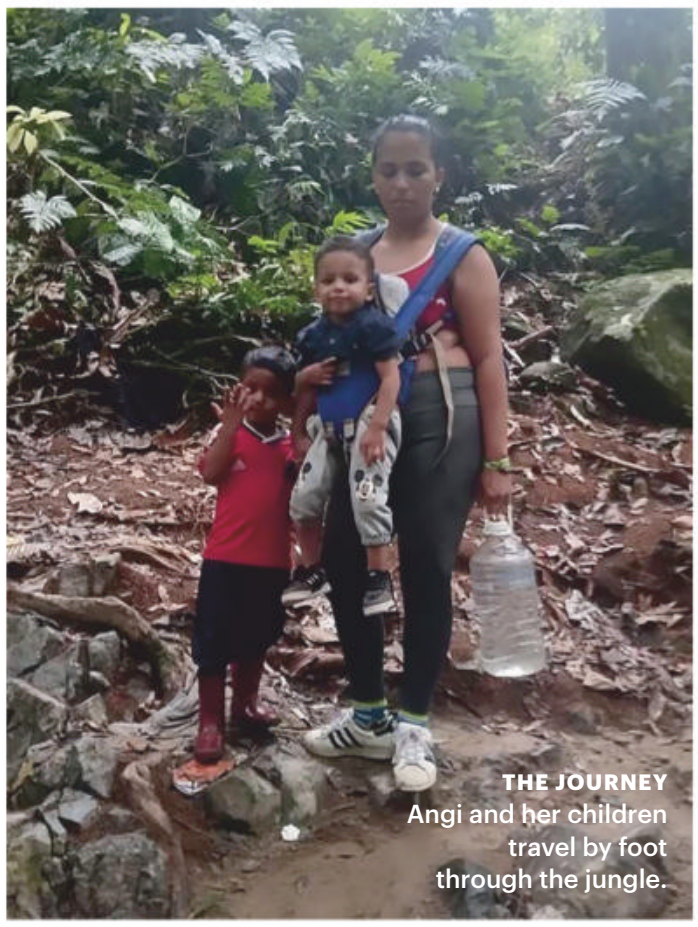
It took only a few months for Chicago's shelters to fill up. In response, the city erected additional emergency shelters housed inside hotels, at least one armory space, and a former manufacturing facility. By the end of 2023, Chicago was running 28 shelters, mostly occupied entirely by migrants. But with hundreds of asylum seekers arriving in the city every week, there were still many who did not secure spots. Some pitched tents along the highways while others slept in city buses that had been designated as temporary housing. More than 3,300 migrants slept in police-station lobbies across the city.

Looking for a more permanent solution, Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson announced the construction of what he called winterized "base camps" last September. His administration shared that the first climate-controlled tent would house as many as 2,000 migrants on a 10-acre site. The plans were immediately met with protest. In a series of public meetings, community residents questioned whether the camps were humane, while others said they simply did not want migrants in their neighborhood. Activists and volunteers, too, pushed back against the plans after Johnson inked a $29 million contract with GardaWorld Federal Services, a controversial security firm that has been criticized for the alleged hazardous conditions inside its immigrant-detention centers in Texas and Canada. After breaking ground in late November, construction was halted after an environmental review showed the site contained high levels of lead, arsenic, and mercury.

In December, the Johnson administration shifted gears and said it planned to move all migrants into existing city shelters before the year's end. By Dec. 15, police stations were empty for the first time in eight months. But four days later, on Dec. 19, a chartered private plane carrying migrants landed at O'Hare airport. After more than a year of sending buses to Chicago, Gov. Abbott had taken his plan airborne. Angi and her five children were among the more than 100 migrants caught in the crosswinds.

Angi had been in El Paso, Texas, for less than 24 hours when someone asked if she wanted to board a flight to Chicago. Fresh from her first shower in weeks – a group of volunteers had taken Angi to a hotel where she was able to clean up – the idea was exciting. After months clawing her way through the Panamanian jungle and Mexican desert to reach the U.S. border, a cushioned seat on a clean airplane sounded nice. Plus, Angi had heard that Chicago was a welcoming place for immigrants. But she had never been on an airplane. She'd never even seen one up close.

At first, the flight was a thrill for Angi. Every sound seemed to surprise and delight her children. Their eyes widened when a voice came over the speaker, and they bounced in their seats as the engine roared, their anticipation propelling them up and down. Their shrill screams filled the cabin when the plane took flight. As they climbed into the sky, Angi looked out the window as the Texas landscape began to shrink from view. The city of El Paso transformed from a sprawling urban landscape to a repeating geometric pattern wedged between the foot of the Franklin Mountains and the Rio Grande River.



THE JOURNEY Angi and her children travel by foot through the jungle.

Partway through the flight, the plane hit turbulence and Angi felt her stomach drop. "I'd never had that feeling in my gut," she recalls. "I kept thinking, 'Are we going to die?' "

By the time Angi arrived at O'Hare, the airport's bus-shuttle center was already operating as what the city calls a "landing zone," or a temporary station where new arrivals wait for placement in a city shelter. The long corridor, which sits between an hourly parking lot and a Hilton Hotel, was first converted into an emergency shelter last June, when migrants began arriving on commercial flights, most of them paid for by Catholic Charities in Texas. The refuge, which stands close to Terminal 1, was meant to only hold people for short periods of time, but as the swell of migrants continued to outpace available shelter spots, the airport, by default, became a longer-term solution for some. As the new year approached, close to 300 migrants remained at the airport. (At one point earlier in the year, O'Hare housed more than 800 migrants.)

"What we have is an international and federal crisis that local governments are being asked to subsidize," says Johnson in a written statement provided to ROLLING STONE. "This is unsustainable because none of our local economies are positioned to be able to carry on such a mission."

But the city and state, says Illinois Coalition of Immigrant and Refugee Rights deputy director Veronica Castro, could also do more. "The federal government definitely has a role to play, but if we had a better infrastructure in place, maybe we would have been better situated to deal with this," she says. "The city and state are both trying, but there's still a lot of room to grow and for us to really live up to what it looks like to support people humanely."

Landing in an ad hoc environment can also compound the stresses that come with leaving home. "What's clear about [O'Hare airport] is that it's an environment that communicates it is temporary," says Aimee Hilado, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, whose research focuses on migrant and refugee trauma. "It is not a home, it is not a shelter, it's not a space where one could create routines that are so essential to people's sense of self. It's just not the kind of location that is necessary to heal from migration trauma."

Inside the terminal, Angi was greeted by staff from Favorite Healthcare Staffing, the Kansas-based company that holds contracts to run the city's emergency migrant shelters. "They told us our arrival was a surprise," says Angi, reflecting on her first conversations with Favorite staff. "No one was expecting us."

The employee offered Angi sandwiches and a stack of four thin blankets. They told Angi she'd have to spend the night sleeping against the terminal windows. By 11 p.m., the temperature had dipped below 30 degrees and the windows felt cold to the touch. Angi laid one of the blankets on the tile floor and pulled her children close to her. She tucked them beneath the remaining three, forming a knit cocoon around her family. "I was very stressed," says Angi, who tried not to resign to the feeling. "I just trusted in God that things would change in the coming days."

The following day, Angi was told she could relocate to a small plot behind a large black curtain that formed a translucent perimeter around hundreds of makeshift beds. She also heard that families were fast-tracked to shelters and she and her children could likely end up in one soon. Stepping behind the curtained space, Angi saw dozens of families living in similar limbo. "The layout is not humane at all," says Vianney Marzullo, a volunteer who has spent the past six months helping migrants living at the airport. Marzullo, along with a large network of Chicago residents, regularly delivers clothes, toiletries, and warm meals there. "These are people used to having their freedom, and they are now stuck in a place where they were supposed to be for 48 hours. It's so far removed from anything else."

At O'Hare airport, under the fluorescent lights that illuminate one of the world's busiest travel hubs, Angi found herself standing still, suspended somewhere between the life she left and the one she'd hoped to find.

INSIDE THE AIRPORT, hours pass slowly. Every morning, Angi and her children wake up around 7 a.m. to the sounds of other children embracing – or rejecting – the morning. Staff lay out a buffet of fruit, milk cartons, cereal, and simple sandwiches. Angi usually takes the breakfast back to her bed, where she balances the paper bowls and plastic utensils on her lap. She tries to encourage her kids to eat fruit, but she'll settle for any calories. They are partial to Kellogg's Frosted Flakes. After breakfast, Angi spends most of the day

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ELLY FISHMAN *is the author of "Refugee High." This is her first story for* ROLLING STONE. *Translations done by* CAMILA GUARDA.

ON STANDBY
At one point last year, O'Hare housed more than 800 migrants.

in a chair toggling between videos and messages on her phone and admonishing her children when they fight. With five kids, squabbles are common: One wants to watch a Coldplay video, and another the recent highlights from a soccer match. Someone wants to draw, and another hogs the crayons. The spats happen dozens of times a day and fizzle as quickly as they spark.

Though Angi left home with a couple of sets of clothes, when she arrived at the airport, she only had one. Her daily uniform includes a pair of blue jeans, a thin maroon sweatshirt with illustrated pink hearts, and a pair of sneakers she wears like slides since they're several sizes too small. Most days, Angi uses the bathroom sinks to wipe herself clean. A bus comes twice a week to shuttle people to public showers at a nearby YMCA. If Angi wants to wash and dry her clothes, she does so in the bathroom sinks and under the electric hand dryers.

When weather permitted, Angi joined a few other migrant mothers and took the elevator one floor down to the airport Chicago Public Transit train stop. From the airport, each ride on the train costs $5, a hefty sum for the mother and her five children, all of whom she brought along. They rode for more than an hour on the train and a bus to the closest Walmart, a place where she'd heard she might collect a few dollars. Standing in the store's parking lot for more than three hours, Angi held up a sign she'd made on a Kellogg's Frosted Flakes box. The message, which she mistranslated on her phone, read "Merry Christmas. Could you help me with some foo or wok? Thank you."

On this December morning, Angi's children keep themselves entertained on the airport floor. Yenni, her belly flat against the ground and her legs propped up behind her, takes a marker to a stack of construction paper. She sketches a collection of faces: Happy. Laughing. Sad. As she draws, a pair of police officers idly pace the room. They nod at familiar faces and chuckle at their quiet, private jokes. Angi watches Yenni draw. She admires her daughter's artwork.

"The other day she said to me, 'Mom, all the effort we put into coming here, and for what? We're stuck here,' " Angi says. "I told her we were going to take it day by day. It's a slow process." The truth is Angi gave up long-term planning many years ago. The notion of a permanent home has been fractured and scattered in the years since she left Venezuela. For Angi, the airport is just another point in a long list of impermanent places.

Sliding back into her chair, Angi watches as a group of holiday travelers – headphones wrapped around their necks, skis tucked snugly inside tailored bags – weave their way through the room. Even their baby's car seat comes with its own bag. The group soon settles in an otherwise empty row of chairs. The baby gurgles from a stroller while the older children remain fixated on their tablets. The man, likely the children's father, surveys the room. His face remains stony as his eyes dart from one corner to the other. He holds a water bottle to his mouth and silently directs his family toward the automatic doors. The group rise to their feet and obediently make their way toward the exit.

Angi watches the family as they cut through the crowd. "Sometimes I look at them and think about how they are able to travel and carry bags," Angi says. "I hope someday that will be me."

Just then, as if attuned to Angi's quiet laments, a man and his daughter approach her.

"She'd like to give her something," the man says, gesturing first to his daughter and then to Yenni. The two girls look about the same age. Angi nods and smiles. She doesn't understand his words, but the sentiment remains clear. The American girl silently hands Yenni a stuffed Minnie Mouse doll before scurrying away. The doll shows patches of wear; it is not a new Minnie Mouse, but one that has been loved and treasured. A wide smile begins to stretch across

OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF THE FAMILY. THIS PAGE: ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/"CHICAGO TRIBUNE"/TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE/GETTY IMAGES

CONVEYOR BELT
After leaving O'Hare, Angi, her boyfriend, and her kids moved into a motel room.

Yenni's face, but before it reaches full tilt, the girl returns. This time she offers Yenni a turquoise dinosaur and a fleece blanket, two items from her suitcase.

"Thank you," Yenni whispers shyly.

"Merry Christmas," says the man. He discreetly hands Angi a few dollars from his wallet and soon disappears through a set of nearby doors.

Yenni admires her new toys. She spends the next several minutes moving the dolls up and over the chairs and floor, familiarizing the creatures with the contours of their new home.

ANGI CAN IDENTIFY the exact moment she decided to leave Venezuela. She grew up in the capital city of Caracas, where she lived with her mother and three siblings. Angi says her eldest brother, the only one with consistent work, helped support the rest of the family. Angi herself went to school until she got pregnant with her first child, at 17. In the years following the country's economic collapse in 2014, Venezuela was not an easy place to raise children. Soaring food prices, along with national food shortages, meant Angi and her children became used to living with hunger pangs. She'd often only be able to buy cheaper, less-healthy ingredients rather than fresh ones. Home didn't offer much relief, either. Angi shared a small house with a dirt floor with her ex-partner.

Despite the country's collapse, Angi managed to stay afloat for several years. That changed in 2016 when her son, who was just a little over a year old at the time, fell ill. Unsure what to do, Angi brought him to a hospital. Angi believes they didn't do enough to save him. "I lost my son because of the health system," Angi says. "They just let you die there."

After that, Angi's world shifted. She knew she couldn't stay in Caracas long-term. So Angi packed her belongings and made her way to neighboring Colombia, joining the almost 8 million Venezuelans who have left the country in recent years. In Colombia, she worked various odd jobs including selling a hodgepodge of wholesale hygiene and cleaning products. After saving a bit of money, Angi returned to Caracas and fetched her four younger children who had been living with her mother. (Her eldest son, then eight, chose to remain in Venezuela with his grandmother.) But even working multiple jobs, Angi remained on the edge of poverty. "Even though we were working, it wasn't enough to live a decent life," Angi says. "My kids weren't even healthy. We couldn't afford healthy foods."

So when her sister announced her plan to make the more than 2,000-mile journey to the United States last fall, Angi decided to try her luck, too. Her motivation was simple: "I wanted a better future for my kids."

To prepare for the journey, Angi packed a backpack with a small gas stove, cans of tuna fish, black beans, and boxes of instant noodles. She carried large jugs of water and put her youngest son in a baby carrier. With just a few hundred dollars, the group traveled by bus and foot until they reached the Darién Gap, the treacherous stretch of jungle between Colombia and Panama. She and her boyfriend, who she'd met in Colombia, used almost all of their money to pay a smuggler to show them a safe route through the jungle. But guiding Angi and her five children proved costly, so the couple could only afford minimal help. That meant that when they reached particularly difficult passages, they were left to fend for themselves.

"The hardest part was the rivers," recalls Angi, who says she lost count of how many she crossed. "They were really fast, and the water was up to my neck. I don't know how to swim." Angi kept her children tied to her body with cables. At one point, her toddler almost drifted away with the current. "I had to grab him by the leg."

After long days walking from early in the morning until evening, Angi would cry herself to sleep on the jungle floor. "I thought about giving up," she says.

CAMILA GUARDA

Angi ran out of money in Guatemala, so she sold candy at stoplights to make some more. When she collected enough, she took her family to a hotel where they showered for the first time since leaving Colombia weeks earlier. From there, they continued on to Mexico and hopped onto several freight trains, a system commonly referred to as "La Bestia," or "the beast." (Another, grimmer nickname is "the train of death.") Like so many people desperate to reach America at almost any cost, Angi clawed her way up the side of a cargo car and pulled herself onto the roof. Once all five children had been carried to the top, Angi planted them toward the center of the car and instructed them not to move. The group rode on top of trains for days, rationing what little food and water they had. Sometimes a train would stop for hours on end in the middle of the desert. "My biggest fear was that my kids would fall off," Angi says. "I didn't sleep the whole time because I was afraid they would roll over."

When Angi reached O'Hare airport, she was exhausted. When she left Colombia three months earlier, she did so without a clear picture of the life she might build in the United States. What she never considered, however, was that she might live in a simulacrum of modern life where shrunken versions of beloved Chicago restaurants hawk second-rate hot dogs and posters for luxury brands like Coach advertise "the epitome of classic American style."

"Sometimes I wonder if I made the right decision," Angi says, the thought sheathed in melancholy. "I hope I did."

ON CHRISTMAS DAY, Angi sits in the same blue metal chair, this time detangling Yenni's thick, wet hair. She spent the morning washing it in the bathroom sink. Angi, who uses a tiny lilac doll's comb, divides Yenni's hair into sections and brushes each one methodically. Throughout the room, there's a notable lift in the air, especially among the children. Angi's boys chase two new remote-control cars around the floor, gifts given to them that morning by a group of volunteers.

Angi is in good spirits, too. Earlier, a man came to the airport asking if anyone was looking for work, and her boyfriend raised his hand. He's since worked a few shifts as a line cook at a Mexican restaurant about an hour and a half away. Angi herself collected a few dollars outside of Walmart, where she spent much of the previous afternoon holding her sign up to people squeezing in last-minute holiday shopping.

Around noon, a muffled voice on an overhead speaker announces that a buffet of food will be served on the sidewalk. Angi quickly gathers her children and joins the line that somehow already snakes around the building. As she makes her way toward the back, José Feliciano's megahit "Feliz Navidad" echoes from a small speaker. The song offers a buoyant soundtrack as a group of volunteers dish out greens, beans and rice, corn, Sam's Club chicken, and cupcakes. They heard about the migrants sleeping at the airport and decided to pool their resources to cook a holiday meal. When a large man in a Santa costume walks the length of the line searching for children to entertain, Angi's children squeal with delight. Angi encourages them to give Santa a hug and pose for a picture, an image she sends to her mother in Venezuela.

"Where are the reindeer?" Yenni asks her mom, which makes Angi laugh. Earlier that day, Yenni worried that Santa wouldn't know where to find them.

A few minutes pass and Angi checks her phone. Her mom hasn't responded, but that's not unusual. They can go days without speaking since her mom has no Wi-Fi at home. The distance weighs on Angi. "I hope I'll see my mother again in Venezuela," she says, looking at a picture of her mom and eldest son smiling on a beach. "Or better yet, bring her here."

After filling five Styrofoam containers with food, Angi and her children head back inside. In Venezuela, they would spend the day eating pan de jamón, a traditional rolled Christmas bread stuffed with cheese, olives, and ham, paired with rice and garlic sauce. Angi also aches for arepas, the Venezuelan cornmeal cakes that she grew up eating.

Before she can stop him, Angi's toddler stuffs an entire cupcake in his mouth. He does it so quickly she might not have noticed if not for the ring of aqua-blue frosting around his mouth.

"Sometimes I look at them and think about how they are able to travel and carry bags," says Angi, who lived at the airport, about other families getting on flights. "I hope someday that will be me."

"It's one of the best Christmases they've ever had," says Angi, encouraging her son to eat the beans and rice. She watches her children, savoring the sight of their every bite.

Around the room, small groups huddle together, their Christmas meals perched on their laps. For most, the Christmas celebration is their first so far away from home. For some, the holiday also marks their second month living in the airport.

Several have been stationed at O'Hare for so long that they've found nearby jobs in restaurant kitchens. Now, like many Chicagoans, they take the train to work each day. But today, they're home. Or the closest thing they have to one.

THE CHRISTMAS FEAST would be Angi's last meal at the airport. Later that day, the same man who gave her boyfriend a job offered to help them book a double-bed room at a Motel 6 around 15 miles away. The motel, he told them, would cut her boyfriend's commute time to just five minutes. It seemed like a good idea, but now, on the last day of the year, Angi fears it was a mistake.

Inside the motel room, child-size fingerprints dot the foggy windows. Angi, legs curled beneath her on one of the two double beds, clicks on the TV and settles on a dubbed version of 2013's *American Hustle*. Jennifer Lawrence's dazzling updo fills the screen.

"I shouldn't have left the airport," says Angi as she wipes tears from her eyes. She and her boyfriend have been fighting. "I'm so alone."

Angi calls over her middle son. He fell while playing on the stairs and cut his eyebrow, and Angi, who had no Band-Aids, fashioned one from stickers she found in a coloring book. The cut has started to heal, but she worries it will get infected. There's a Walgreens up the road, but a box of Band-Aids costs $4, money she doesn't yet have.

Angi's choice to seek asylum in the U.S. placed her in a system already burdened with 2 million pending cases. Just in the last year, more than 800,000 people have filed for asylum, marking a 63 percent rise from the year before. Under President Biden's administration, arrests by the Border Patrol for illegal crossings at the southern border have reached their highest level since the 1960s. In Chicago, Mayor Johnson has joined the mayors of New York and Denver in calling for more federal support. "We have said repeatedly that we need Congress to provide the resources needed to carry out this mission," says Johnson in his statement. One way to do that, he has said, is to declare the crisis a federal emergency.

While the Biden administration has not taken such steps, last September, the president did grant some 400,000 Venezuelans who arrived in the country before August 2023 temporary protected status and fast-tracked work visas. Angi, however, does not qualify for either. Even if she could work legally, Angi would need someone to watch her children while she worked. While all but the toddler could attend public school, the closest public elementary schools to the Motel 6 are a 45-minute walk away.

New Year's Eve also marks Angi's 29th birthday, and the first she'll celebrate so far from home. In the following weeks, the temperatures will drop and warnings of the season's first real winter storm will fill the news. Angi's daily trips to chain-store parking lots will dwindle and her children will grow antsy. She'll fill the miniature fridge with bananas, peanut butter, and boxes of microwave noodles. She'll send pictures of snow-covered streets to her mother and report on her children's well-being. Yenni will ask her again why she decided to come to America. And again, Angi will encourage patience and tell her daughter they're taking things one day at a time.

Back at O'Hare, a few days into the new year, a young, pregnant woman sits in the same metal chairs where Angi once watched her children play. The woman will soon have a baby, but she doesn't know when. Or where. A few feet away, a group of high school students huddle together in a vestibule while waiting for their bus. Their backpacks are decorated with keychains and trinkets, and their phones ring with viral sound bites. The last holiday lights still sparkle against the dreary landscape. Overhead, the sounds of intricately choreographed jets rumble from the air.

Between last June and January, more than 915 flights carrying 4,560 migrants landed in Chicago. And the planes keep coming. Soon, another jet will carry a group of migrants, hundreds of people who, like Angi, may find themselves stuck in an uncertain limbo among millions of travelers who know precisely where they'll land.

National Affairs

Young, Black, and Done With Biden

Taking a ride through Detroit with the young Black Democratic voters who helped get the president into office in 2020 – and aren't so sure about doing it again

By ANDRE GEE

TROY, MICHIGAN, IS quintessential suburbia: strip malls, banks with drive-thrus, and jewelry stores. Though just 30 minutes outside of Detroit, Troy feels a world away from the Motor City, with its blocks of boarded-up houses and abandoned stores. The disparate environments speak to the systemic inequality that brought me here to talk politics and the bind that Joe Biden has gotten himself into.

Inside Fresh & Pressed Juice, a brightly lit juice bar and cafe with a vibrant green ceiling, I talk with the impeccably dressed shop owner Kiara Smith and her husband, rapper Icewear Vezzo, who has braved the snow in a designer wool jacket. Over smoothies, Vezzo takes off like a rocket when I ask what issues he'd like to see presidential candidates address in the lead-up to November.

Vezzo says that over the past several years he's been paying attention to electoral politics more than ever. He thinks Biden's deceitful and that likely Republican candidate Donald Trump is a blabbermouth; independent candidate Robert F. Kennedy is his preference over both men. He takes some local pride in Michigan being a battleground state because he says voters are "actually paying attention."

"It's not about a party. It's about good, bad, right, wrong, period," he says, diamonds dancing in his gleaming Cuban chain as he leans forward for emphasis. "We got good people in Michigan, no matter what political party they follow. There's good and bad people everywhere." Smith, sitting next to him in between managing her shop, says she agrees.

The 34-year-old indie rapper grew up on the east side of Detroit in a house with three bedrooms and 10 people. In 2017, he was convicted on a gun charge and served 20 months. He's been directly impacted by the systems that sustain inequality, which is why he's so politically engaged, putting on holiday giveaways and food drives, as well as participating in community events with Detroit Councilwoman Mary Sheffield. I'd been told by his publicist about other noble deeds he didn't reveal when I asked about his community work, a sign of genuine humility.

As a prominent recording artist who also has an ear to the streets, he finds himself all over the city. He tells me about a recent discussion he had with college students and "some street guys."

"You want to know what the conversation was about?" he asks. "The 1994 Crime Bill. You know who drafted that?"

"Biden," I answer.

"Exactly. We pay attention to that. There was a mass incarceration of Black Americans. We see things like that and [our dissatisfaction with Biden] is not about 'We got money [from Trump].' A lot of people think we completely support Donald Trump," he says. "We just believe in holding everybody accountable. It's not fair to us to be told to believe that only one guy's making mistakes, [and] only one guy is [making] smart decisions. They both got flaws."

Biden is nursing a roughly 40 percent approval rating, second worst only to Jimmy Carter among first-term candidates in their third year of office. On Feb. 3, Biden won the South Carolina primary by a commanding 96 percent. About half of Democratic voters in the state are Black – though only four percent of registered voters turned out, the results are a much-needed positive sign for the president.

Such highlights have been few and far between for Biden of late. Many within his constituency feel he's not up for the job again, especially young Black voters who believe the Democratic Party takes them for granted. In 2020, after the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, millions of Americans demonstrated in the streets and demanded radical change, including defunding the police. But Biden has said that "the answer is not to defund," and has budgeted more than $30 billion for his Safer America Plan, which includes initiatives to add 100,000 additional police officers nationwide. Though many are wary of a second Trump administration, Biden's penchant for maintaining the status quo has left many young Black voters disillusioned with the prospect of voting for him. In the past few months, that dynamic has only intensified, with the sentiment that the blood of more than 26,000 dead Palestinian civilians is on Biden's hands via his support of Israel's military operations in Gaza.

In 2016, Trump won Michigan by nearly 11,000 votes over Hillary Clinton. In 2020, Biden won Michigan 50.6 percent to 47.8 percent – though, in Detroit, he received fewer individual votes than Clinton four years prior. While 2020 exit polls tabulated that 92 percent of Black people in Michigan had voted for Biden, his current approval number with Black people is at just 62 percent, according to a January EPIC-MRA poll. A lot can happen by Election Day, but early national polls favor Trump. A Glengariff Group poll during the same month showed Trump is leading Biden 47 percent to 39 percent in Michigan (the first time Trump has led in Michigan in one of its pre-election polls), and a Bloomberg poll postulated that Trump is poised to receive more Black votes than any Republican candidate ever: 14 to 30 percent, as opposed to eight percent in 2020.

VUHLANDES FOR "BILLBOARD"

"We got good people in Michigan, no matter what political party they follow. There's good and bad people everywhere."

Icewear Vezzo

The problem has not gone unnoticed in the White House. In a statement, Quentin Fulks, Biden's principal deputy campaign manager, tells ROLLING STONE: "Young Black voters are key to our reelection, which is why we're investing earlier than ever to mobilize them around an agenda that is fighting for their future. We are laying strong foundations in place to energize and activate young Black voters around the issues they care most about, while highlighting the real threat Donald Trump and MAGA Republicans pose to their freedoms, our democracy, and their economic well-being."

The coming months will show whether or not that's mere lip service. According to the Detroiters I spoke to, the party's political future depends on making young Black voters feel heard. Along with Vezzo, several Detroit-area organizers and politicians tell me the Biden-Harris ticket needs to strengthen its presence within the city and address housing and food insecurity, unemployment, and overall poverty – last April, the Detroit-Warren-Dearborn area recorded the second-highest inflation rate in the nation, at seven percent more than the prior year. Biden needs Michigan's 15 electoral votes to win the election, and the people I spoke with say he needs to act like it.

"I'm here needing the Democratic Party," says 24-year-old Detroit Action organizer David Parnell. "I need them and they need me for us both to live. The other side clearly doesn't need me, to take my rights away from me."

IN NORTHWEST DETROIT'S Old Redford neighborhood, I meet 269th District delegate Harrison Shelby at Motor City Java House. It looks like a cozy space – but then Shelby and John George, the co-owner of the building, escort me to the back. Several rooms later, I realize I'm walking through a sprawling multipurpose complex.

George is the founder of Detroit Blight Busters, a nonprofit that aims to improve local neighborhoods. An upbeat man rocking a Tigers cap, he tells me his mission started in 1988, when he and some neighbors boarded up an abandoned house that had turned into a spot for people to do drugs. He and his wife, Alicia, then bought neglected properties, turning them into community space and low-cost living. The walls of the complex are covered by colorful art by painter Charles "Chazz" Miller and the students he teaches. It's encouraging to see Detroiters renovating their communities, but it shouldn't all be on them; local and federal governments need to provide more aid.

Eventually, Shelby and I have a seat in Artist Village Detroit, a space typically used for live-music and poetry events. Today, it's quiet, and Shelby has enough pull to access the Village for our talk.

Shelby is known around here as "Mr. Community" for his organizing endeavors, including his work with the nonprofit Detroit Action. As a delegate, he's a liaison between elected officials and people in his community. Shelby says Biden is struggling with young Black voters because of a sense that the Democratic Party doesn't address their concerns. "A lot of people are disconnected overall from government and voting," he says. "I understand the disconnect. I think young people are more critical of the issues that are impacting them now, and they're tired of 'politicians' only coming around when it's election time. Oftentimes, we're used as a pawn in this fight. Black women have saved party politics time and time again. And then we're often left on the short end of the stick when it's things that we care about."

Shelby is right: Black women have been the Democratic Party's most loyal supporters. They were considered the key to 2018's "blue wave," which resulted in more than 20 Black women being voted into Congress for the first time in history. In 2008 and 2012, 96 percent of Black women voted for Barack Obama, 94 percent of Black women voted for Clinton in 2016, and 93 percent voted for Biden in the 2020 election. In Georgia, where voter suppression may have kept gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams out of office in 2018, Black women spurred voting drives and voting-rights education. Georgia registered 800,000 new voters from 2018 to 2020, which helped propel Biden's narrow 12,000-vote victory in the state.

Ayanna Adams is a 29-year-old student at Detroit's Wayne State University, where she's the communi-

ty outreach and engagement coordinator with the school's Black Student Union as well as its Detroit Action liaison. She also serves in the Air Force. She laments that those around her gauge candidates on a superficial level: "I know a lot of younger people who are like, 'I see a female running, I'm going to just vote for anyone female,' or, 'I'll vote for anyone Black.' Not knowing what their political stance is."

That dynamic could play into Trump's favor, and there have been rumors about him looking for a Black running mate. Trump's actions have been seen as attempts to appeal to Black male voters in 2020, usually with ploys such as meeting Black celebrities like Kanye West and the late Jim Brown, and pardoning rappers Lil Wayne and Kodak Black.

In a December 2020 op-ed, organizer Branden Snyder wrote that "while the Democrats have largely ignored Black men, Trump invested in these voters, at least superficially." Snyder is the executive director of Detroit Action, a nonprofit that reached more than 200,000 working-class Black and brown Detroit-area residents and got 20,000 to complete a "Pledge to Vote" card in 2020.

Parnell, Shelby, and Adams collectively agree that among Detroit's biggest issues are housing and food insecurity, a school-to-prison pipeline, a 5.8 percent unemployment rate, and a $388.8 million Detroit Police Department budget. And they all feel Biden hasn't done enough to address these issues.

The city declared bankruptcy in 2013 after the auto industry hit an all-time low. The roots of poverty first appeared during Detroit's economic peak in the 1960s, when the influx of people moving there for auto-factory jobs spurred landlords to raise the rent on Black residents, driving many into poverty. Housing fell into disrepair. Once the auto industry was decentralized and plants moved out, thousands lost their jobs throughout the Sixties and Seventies. Today, the city reels from the consequences of poverty with housing and employment shortages as well as violence. Though the city's 252 murder rate last year was the lowest it's been since 1966, the Motor City has a long way to go.

In 2022, Michigan once again became a "triple blue" state when Democrats won the state House and Senate, joining Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. But the results of the Democratic majority have been mixed. Both Vezzo and Adams say they haven't seen new policies reflected in their communities. "I [saw] a change in downtown Detroit as far as the way it looks," Vezzo says. "I think my community is talked about but not thought about."

But that's not to say there have been no changes for marginalized groups. Shelby and Parnell extolled the protection of reproductive rights. Parnell is also overjoyed by Whitmer signing protections for the LGBTQ community, including an anti-discrimination law. "I probably cried that day I read that I couldn't lose my job here because I'm trans," Parnell says.

Parnell says they worry about the "fascism" that would arise from a Trump reelection. "There are people who think him being in the office would be funny, but that passiveness scares me," they say. I'm kneeling back in a comfy office chair, but Parnell sits up while conveying how serious the stakes are. "We're in a dangerous landscape when it comes to [Trump] having more power, on top of a rise in neo-Nazis, and white nationalism, both of which see him as the leader." Parnell rues that "all branches of government" are plagued by people espousing "white Christian moral nationalism" who threaten abortion and LGBTQ rights.

For now, Michigan's "blue wall" protects those rights – but how long it will hold is anyone's guess.

"I did not vote for Trump. The only thing I could appreciate was the stimulus checks that were given during the pandemic."

Ayanna Adams

After speaking with Shelby, I stand outside with him in Old Redford waiting for my Uber in the snow. He points out more "Chazz" Miller art on the side of one spot, and tells me about Sweet Potato Sensations, a Black-owned bakery that infuses sweet potatoes into every dish. Around the corner is the Obama Building: Built as a bank in 1917, it became a department store, then a vacant eyesore, until 2020, when a $3.6 million renovation turned it into a retail space with four affordable residential units. The building is owned by the Peter and Julie Fisher Cummings Foundation, which allowed a neighborhood advisory council to decide the name.

Every president finds their name on schools and libraries, but it speaks to Obama's stature in the Black community that he's being honored at a retail-residential property. An audit of Obama's legacy reveals a record on immigration and drone attacks that repels leftists, as does his decrying the term "defund the police." Still, his eight years made Black voters feel more seen than ever by the establishment. Obama admitted Trayvon Martin could've been his son. Michelle Obama embodied a powerful Black womanhood we'd never seen in the White House.

The Obama Building exists as a beacon of possibility, but the neighborhoods around it still represent the negligence of a system that, Detroiters say, Obama's successors haven't done enough to change. Aside from Democratic Councilwoman Sheffield and district delegate Shelby, who calls himself a "card-carrying Democrat," none of the 34-and-younger people I spoke to in Detroit labeled themselves as leftists, liberals, conservatives, or otherwise. I got the sense that those seemed like labels of an ecosystem in which they don't feel fully considered. They just want someone willing to offer radical change, from whichever side of the aisle. Shelby says, "Young people feel like the candidates and the elected officials that are currently out there are out of touch with what's actually happening in our community."

He suggests that the Democrats' ignorance of the Black working class is a reflection of prior generations being comfortable with such treatment. "The older generation, they're involved, but it's not been effective and they've only been given the crumbs off of the table," Shelby reflects. "A lot of times, they're satisfied with just that. Whereas the younger generation is saying, '[It's] not enough to be taking pictures with the elected officials or having those connections if it's not being reflective of things that we need in our community.' "

Shelby says that while he has good relationships with the older generation, "young people are just more savvy about the process now." He recalls being at City Council meetings where older Detroiters demanded things from council members that they should have been asking of Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan. And while leftists are in favor of defunding the police, he says, the older generation is more susceptible to Biden's calls to "fund the police."

"Older Detroiters are buying into the narrative that they need to feel safe, but what does public safety really look like and mean?" Shelby asks. "Safe communities don't mean more police." While Biden may poll well with older Detroiters, his policies just might not push far enough for young Black voters. The way he chooses to bridge the gap will determine how much voting power he garners in November.

While Shelby voted for Biden in 2020, he says that he hasn't seen enough genuine representation in the Democratic Party. "I believe we needed someone to challenge Trump. And at the time, [Biden] was the person that could challenge him," he says. "Now, I feel like my voice doesn't matter in the party as someone that has skin in the game. I've sacrificed my time, my talent, my money, [but] I don't feel my identity is reflected in the party. Only in a very token-ish way."

DAVID RODRIGUEZ MUNOZ/USA TODAY NETWORK

Parnell says they'd also like to see more representation for the LGBTQ community, or "these people are not going to be willing to join the fight."

SAUL WILLIAMS is a 52-year-old L.A.-based musician, poet, and activist who crafted the protest anthems "Not in Our Name" and "Act III Scene 2 (Shakespeare)." In 2011, he signed his name to Occupy Musicians, a segment of the Occupy movement supporting economic equality. He thinks the Democratic Party hasn't kept up with the radical desires of Black progressives, leaving them wanting more.

"I don't think that it's ever been about a gamification of votes for Black people," Williams tells me. "It's not about the blue team or the red team. We go where justice is. And it just so happens that for a certain amount of time, we have seen something that has fallen closer to justice on the side of the Democrats. However, I would argue that there's always been Black socialists, there are always trends towards types of radicalism that may have singled out someone like an Amiri Baraka or Sonja Sanchez in the past, where we find more people aligned with that sort of thinking."

Williams says that during the 2016 election cycle, Sen. Bernie Sanders represented that radical streak. He ran for the Democratic nomination on a platform of "democratic socialism," including universal health care, universal college education, Wall Street reform, increased LGBTQ rights, and immigration reform. His platform promises, if enacted into legislation, would have helped uproot America's economic inequality.

"I remember being around young people who were saying shit like, 'I like that old man,'" Williams recalls. "Had nothing to do with [Bernie's] age. It had everything to do with the fact that he was talking about something that people could relate to – not now, but then." Williams says that for those same young people, Clinton's primary win was "a marking point of when a lot of people were like, 'You know what? The Democrats are fucking up. The Democratic leadership is a little too paternalistic.'"

Williams feels like the Democratic leadership, previously Nancy Pelosi and now Chuck Schumer, have been "scolding" the Squad, the collective of progressive Democratic congresspeople comprising Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman of New York, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Cori Bush of Missouri, Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, Greg Casar of Texas, and Summer Lee of Pennsylvania. "The Democratic leaders are like, 'Wait your turn, the time is not now, listen to Nancy, listen to Chuck, this is how we do it.' I would say that that sort of paternalism in the Democratic Party has frustrated people."

But that said, Williams isn't voting for Trump: "I don't know a nigga that would vote for Trump. You have to be far-fetched to believe that that's going to save you. Never would I vote for that dude."

After meeting with Parnell at Detroit Action's Kettering headquarters, I get a ride to my hotel from Vanessa Velazquez, organizing director at Detroit Action. It's snowing, and she takes her time driving down East Grand Boulevard, giving her more time to give me the lay of the land of Michigan politics.

It's hard not to notice the steady shift in overall glitz as we near downtown Detroit. When I told Icewear Vezzo where the Detroit Action office was, he matter-of-factly said, "That's the trenches." Their command center sits next to two large, empty warehouses.

I think about John George at the Java House; if there were more people with the means to invest in their neighborhood like he did, Detroit citizens could rebuild the city. I realize some people may vote for Trump on the false hope that he offers more windfall cash, and they can then turn one of these vacant buildings into their dream establishment.

Many have attributed the 2020 stimulus relief checks and Congress' Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to Trump. In December 2020, Trump signed a $900 billion Covid-relief package and a $1.4 trillion government-spending bill. The relief package included a second round of $600 stimulus checks to American citizens and a PPP program for small businesses. Ayanna Adams says she used the loans to fund her entrepreneurial endeavors, including a cleaning service and notary business.

"I did benefit from the money, and I was able to put my business in the next level [where] some grants weren't applicable for me, [and] I needed help with payroll for the two employees that I had. But there were a lot of people who abused that," she says. "I did not vote for Trump. The only thing that I could appreciate was the stimulus checks that were given during the pandemic."

Along with people like Adams who took out legitimate loans, there were more than $200 billion in fraudulent loans given out to people who frivolously spent the money, such as Pretty Ricky singer Baby Blue, who swindled more than $24 million. Rappers like Los Angeles' YG and St. Louis' Sexyy Red have said that people in their neighborhoods view Trump as a champion for the PPP loans, with the latter telling the Theo Von podcast, "We love Trump. We need him back because, baby, them checks. Trump, we miss you."

Vezzo says that a cousin of his took out a loan for a tax business, and that he knows of "10 individuals" who started record labels with their loans. But he pushed back on the idea that the promise of more money is enough to sway Black voters toward Trump. "That's saying we're one-track-minded," he says. "That's saying we're driven by money. That's not fair to us."

"It's important for [Biden] to make the correlation of what they've done and how that impacts the day-to-day life of Detroiters."

Detroit City Councilwoman Mary Sheffield

AS WE ENTER the election year, a new and more immediate concern has come into focus: Biden's support of Israel's military occupation in Gaza. At least 2 million Palestinians have been displaced from the IDF's constant bombing. The people of Gaza are facing mass starvation and disease. It's a brutal humanitarian crisis playing out live on social media, and pro-Palestinian protesters are stalking Biden at public events.

An October Data for Progress poll showed that 80 percent of Democrats want a cease-fire. But shortly after the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel should stop genocidal action in Gaza, White House spokesman John Kirby told reporters that "we continue to believe in the approach we have been taking."

Vezzo says he's seen an obfuscation of anti-occupation sentiment by people in power, bemoaning that "[if] somebody's saying, 'Stop killing civilians,' they immediately say, 'You're antisemitic, and you're pro-Hamas.' What the fuck does Hamas got to do with me not wanting to see babies die?"

When asked how Biden feels about the violence in Gaza hurting his candidacy, an anonymous White House source tells me: "He approaches it, first and foremost, as commander in chief and someone who prioritizes American national security and global security. He also approaches it as a human being with deep empathy and respect for every person, and that's what has been on full display throughout the situation."

Williams tells me Biden's actions have demonstrated the antithesis of empathy. "There is a shift in the idea of the American dream," he says. "The antiquated idea of power, which has everything to do with white men and patriarchy and capitalism, is not what many of us are dreaming of." He believes Biden's continued funding of Israel is deterring many potential voters. [*Cont. on 79*]

COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF COUNCIL PRESIDENT MARY SHEFFIELD/CITY OF DETROIT

Kristen Stewart

Uncensored

After more than two decades in the spotlight, Stewart knows who she is — and what she wants

BY ALEX MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLLIER SCHORR

Kristen Stewart is strong as fuck,

and I do not mean this metaphorically. I am not, for instance, talking about any experience from her past that she has quote-unquote risen above, like that time she was in those vampire-werewolf movies and dubbed the World's Most Hated Actress because she did not appear sufficiently stoked to sit in a room full of journalists and discuss making out with her co-stars. Or the time she was photographed kissing her much older (and married) *Snow White and the Huntsman* director, and, due to the horror this engendered, was banished from the sequel. I am not talking about the bravery it took to play Joan Jett in front of Joan Jett. Or the bravery it took to play Princess Diana in front of the entire moviegoing world. Or the bravery it took to come out on *SNL* in the form of a snappy retort to the mean tweets of a demented reality-show host turned president. In other words, I am not talking about "strength" as the gold-star descriptor given to famous women who don't crumble beneath the other labels society lobs at them. No. I am talking, quite literally, about Kristen Stewart's biceps.

OK, let me back up. It's an early afternoon in January. We're on a large deck perched neatly on a hillside of Los Feliz, with a commanding view of tropical foliage. The weather has reverted to that bland meteorological perfection endemic to Los Angeles, despite a morning that was topsy-turvy, bringing down a small tree in Stewart's yard. "Wtf kinda crazy witch energy you bring to L.A.?!!" read an email waiting in my inbox when I awoke. "It's crazy out there!" It was the latest message in a chain we'd started to try to figure out what to do on our second day together, though the back-and-forth had quickly devolved (evolved?) into a series of book and article recommendations and Stewart's confession that, when it comes to these types of interviews, "the disco anxiety *is* real."

Eventually, she invites me along to what she'd planned to do anyway that afternoon: kickbox with her trainer Rashad. We are ostensibly meeting so she can promote *Love Lies Bleeding,* a roided-up romantic thriller directed by Rose Glass, in which Stewart plays a gym manager lusting after a bodybuilder (played by Katy O'Brian) who, as Stewart describes it, "comes in and shakes up the Coke can, but it fucking explodes and everyone gets messy" ("messy" being the quaintest way possible to describe the bloody, sweaty, id-driven hellscape that follows). In this context, kickboxing is the sort of cliché, movie-promotion-adjacent thing Stewart would usually refuse to do, and therefore, we figured, the most subversive thing she could do. "Less talk, more rock," she advised.

By now, it's pretty well-established that "subversive" is Stewart's thing. Imagine her, age 17, refusing to play Bella Swan in the perky, bright-eyed manner the adults all had in mind, and choosing instead to mope around like she was *actually in love with an undead person*. ("The studio was trying to make a movie for kids. They didn't want what actually was the book. When the fuck are [Bella and Edward] smiling, ever?") Then, having spent five years on a franchise that earned more than $3.5 billion worldwide, spawned such things as *Twilight*-branded blow dryers, and momentarily made Stewart the highest-paid actress in the world, there was the transition once and (mostly) for all to art-house indies – which she'd been making in between all those *Twilight* installments, sometimes shooting three or four movies a year. There was *Clouds of Sils Maria,* for which she turned down the part of the starlet in favor of the slightly grubby assistant, and proceeded to win a César (the French equivalent of the Oscar), the only American woman to have done so. There was *Spencer,* which earned her an Oscar nomination for Best Actress for so artfully crawling out of her own skin. After we hung out, she was headed to Park City, Utah, where she was being honored with a Visionary Award while premiering her 11th and 12th Sundance films – *Love Lies Bleeding* as well as *Love Me,* a post-apocalyptic romance in which she plays a buoy to Steven Yeun's satellite ("Basically, the internet – the knowable universe – is contained in this machinery, and they start trying to figure out how to date," she explains). "We were starting to film, and it can be a very tense scene," Yeun tells me of working with Stewart on such an unconventional project. "She just put her hand on my shoulder and was like, 'Hey, I like you.' And that just melted away all the brain fog. She's very deep and cool that way."

That depth and cool have long made Stewart a go-to choice for countercultural roles, women who stand out because they are at a remove from whatever world envelops them. But they are also the qualities behind Stewart's ability to make characters seem countercultural by virtue of the fact that she is playing them, bringing a reserve and restraint that might seem like underkill in a franchise in which she has to speak, out loud, lines like "Hello, biceps!" but that scintillates in more nuanced fare. "She understands how people cover, and she is able to play that, which makes her work so interesting and different," says Jodie Foster, who began shooting *Panic Room* with Stewart when she was 10. "I remember just being in awe of this kid."

By the time I arrive at her house, Stewart, now 33, has been up for many hours. There was a spell when she had "a very fucked-up relationship with sleep," but now she goes to bed early and rises early, waking up to work with fiancee Dylan Meyer on one of the many projects being spearheaded by Nevermind, the production company the two founded with producer Maggie McLean in 2023. (Stewart tells me that it wasn't named after the Nirvana album per se, but that they do share the band's urge to "somehow slip in and fuck shit up for the better.") "Me and Dylan are writing something, so the first three hours, we treasure them. Our brains are just working well at that time," Stewart says. "When she moved into this house, I had no curtains, three forks, and I never drank coffee, and I was like, 'I don't sleep.' She's like, 'In the morning, you drink coffee and you work, and you're alive, and you're awake, and then at night you close the curtains.' In retrospect, it was so obvious."

When Stewart leads me outside, Meyer is already on the deck, limbering up in a white New Order T-shirt while Rashad arranges yoga mats and free weights. Soon Stewart has a playlist going, and Rashad is having us "separate our shoulder blades and engage our core" to the croons of Vivien Goldman as Stewart's black rescue mutt, Cole, meanders between the mats. We stretch. We shadowbox. Then comes the moment Stewart had warned me about: the chin-up competition on a free-standing contraption set up on the deck. I do approximately zero. Meyer manages several. Stewart does chin-up after chin-up after chin-up, then switches to a different grip and does some more, as we all look on admiringly.

"You should know that Kristen is good at everything. It's both inspiring but also annoying," Meyer says to me quietly without a hint of actual annoyance.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go!" Rashad screams. "You're strong as fuck, let's go!"

Stewart finally drops from the bar, panting.

She flashes that famous sideways grin, and then glances toward the body pads: "Let's get in the ring."

DRIVEN BY
PRIDE

IT HAD BEEN A SUBVERSION of the idea of a "strong woman" that led Stewart to *Love Lies Bleeding,* she'd told me a few weeks earlier, sitting in her living room on a black leather sofa under large metal letters that spell out "ASS." This afternoon, it is witchy raining, and the view out the glass doors barely goes past the deck, where in addition to the pull-up stand, there is a claw-foot bathtub Stewart had moved from one of the bathrooms and hooked up outside ("It breaks a lot, but it's really fucking nice to take a bath out there"). Unimposing from the outside, the house slopes down the hillside elegantly, but is haphazardly furnished and a little unkempt. Across from the sunken living room – where a white plastic mannequin perches on a bench laid out with stacks of Nevermind scripts and papers – there is a wall of books to one side (Mary Shelley, Jack Kerouac, Kim Gordon, Kathy Acker) and a sort of game room to the other, complete with an orange-topped pool table, a *Playboy* pinball machine, a row of metal lockers, and a refrigerator with a large orange biohazard sticker on the door. A room off the kitchen boasts a crumbling sofa, a drum kit, and a collection of acoustic and electric guitars. Near the stairs, water stains mark the ceiling, and the words "life is beautiful" are graffitied in bright-red paint.

"Just so you know, that 'life is beautiful' thing – do you know Mr. Brainwash?" Stewart motions wryly to the graffitied wall. "He came over with a friend of mine and did this, and I was like, 'So I know that I do sort of live in a frat house, but that is psychotic.' Do you know what I mean? To think that you could just do that to someone's fucking house." During the pandemic, Stewart graffitied the word "MAINLY" underneath in all caps. "Anyway," she continues, shrugging, "just to contextualize that: Fuck that guy."

Stewart bought the house about 12 years ago, as a place to "go hide in" during a breakup with Robert Pattinson, back when they were both having to ride around in the trunks of cars to try to thwart the prying paparazzi. In a theoretical way, she understands the interest people still have in that relationship – she really does – but as she'll later tell me: "Rob and I can't just keep talking about that shit, because it's fucking weird. It's like if someone kept asking you – I mean for literally decades – 'But senior year in high school?' You're like, 'Fucking A, man! I don't know!' "

Whatever her reserve on film, today Stewart has an excitable, spring-loaded quality. Soon after we begin talking, she wanders off, without preamble, to change from black leather workman's shoes into sneakers ("I'm a soft-shoe guy. I went somewhere today and got dressed or whatever, but now I'm like, 'Why the fuck am I in these big shoes?' "). A few minutes later, she wanders off again ("She just keeps walking away from me," she narrates from my perspective), and returns from the biohazard fridge with two Coors Lights. "You can have a beer if you want," she announces. "I'm going to have one."

We crack open the cans. She returns to the couch. She wears a worn, black T-shirt with holes in both armpits, baggy black jeans, and chipped black nail polish. Her mullet is pulled into a short ponytail at the back of her head, dark strands escaping errantly.

"Do you already know what you're–" she stops herself. "I know actors are defensive. I don't mean this, like, 'Do you already know what you're going to write?' But are you already – I don't know – a little outlined or something?"

No, I tell her. We only just met. How could I know what the contours of the story would be?

"OK, cool." She leans toward me, legs wide and elbows on her knees. "We'll figure something out."

There's a lot to say about *Love Lies Bleeding,* so we might as well start there. And here's how that went: Stewart was in London for the premiere of *Spencer.* The morning after, having slept not a wink ("We were really Englanding out"), she came down to the lobby of her swanky "press junket" hotel for a meeting with director Rose Glass, whose debut film, *Saint Maud* – a psychological fever dream about religious obsession – Stewart had loved. They sat at a table off to one side. They sipped tea. Glass explained that her takeaway of what people wanted from her next was a film about a strong woman, a strong lead character.

"What does that mean?" Stewart asks now, narrowing her eyes. "It's bullshit. It means that we're not actually letting women define themselves. It's the assumption that we need to be empowered by the people deciding who gets to have perspective, that we have to provide something aspirational. It's the lowest-hanging fruit there is." Glass told her that she had figured out a way to subvert that expectation: She had taken the note literally. "She was like, 'Strong girl? Bodybuilding. Got it.' Simple as that."

"It was really fun to be allowed to have the little, dikey sister be the main protagonist."

By the time she left the meeting, Stewart knew she would take the part that Glass had written with her in mind – the role of Lou, the gym manager, who is butch and tough and closed like a fist, until the bodybuilder, Jackie, explodes her whole world – but she didn't officially sign on until she'd returned to L.A. and read the script. "I had some friends over for dinner when I got the message," says Glass of receiving the news. "I think I was a bit drunk already. I just remember there being lots of very jubilant shouting and excited jumping up and down."

Afterward, Stewart finished the campaign expected of Oscar-nominated actors ("It becomes like you're teaching a curriculum on your movie") and then flew to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where *Love Lies Bleeding* would film, showing up at Glass' house with a stylist to lay waste to Diana's blond hair, even grabbing the scissors at the end to make it look like Lou had cut her mullet herself. "Once I cut my hair, I was like, 'See you, forever,' " Stewart says of leaving *Spencer* behind.

Lou was a very different story – a character whose seedy, pumped-up world could not have been more different from Princess Diana's gilded cage, whose sex scenes were about female pleasure and female bodies alone, who wasn't aspirational or going on some journey of self-discovery, and who was not at all the type of person about whom movies are generally made. "It was really fucking fun to be allowed to have the little, dikey sister be the main protagonist in a movie," Stewart says. "That's never the main character in a movie. That's never the one that you want to fuck. I mean, that's the one some people do, but not the one that you are prescribed to want to fuck."

As an openly gay movie star – "and there aren't that many openly gay movie stars" – it felt personal in a way Stewart hadn't quite expected: a queer film that didn't revolve around the "coming out" narrative, and in which the queerness was less a plot point than a vibe. She has long talked about roles as not a form of escapism, but rather a means of exploring different facets of her identity – imagining who she might be if her "nature" had been exposed to an entirely different "nurture." But playing Lou felt like a return to her "first setting," she tells me. "It is a really weird, kind of moving return to form in some way. Kind of like who you are when you're 11 – physically, the clothes you choose to wear – before you've just been pummeled by male expectation."

She takes a swig of beer and leans back into the sofa. "I never have felt like I have performed a femininity in order to reap its benefits in a way that felt like a lie," she continues. "I'm very fluid, and I've never felt like, 'Oh, wow, I was doing this lie for a long time in order to get jobs.' That would be wrong. I have had a good time playing with all of the tonal qualities. But there's so much room for success when you choose the girlie one. There's no room for this other one."

OK, LET ME BACK UP AGAIN. Because nurture does matter, here are some broad strokes.

Stewart grew up in the Los Angeles suburb of Woodland Hills. Her dad was a stage manager who worked on shows like the Oscars and *Fear Factor,* and when Stewart went to work with him, she hated it – all the rushing around and commotion ("I would hide in the engineers' room and play bass with them"). Her mom was a script supervisor who worked on movies like *Mortal Kombat* and *Little Giants,* and when Stewart went to work with *her,* she loved it – the quiet and stillness, the feeling of everyone working together to suspend some fragile bubble of make-believe. When she was eight, and because she had noticed acting was the only job kids could have that allowed them to miss school, she asked her mom to take her to an audition seminar, one of those one-stop shops where you get headshots and the promise of being connected to some agents if you don't suck too much. Stewart – whose drama experience up to that point consisted of reenacting scenes from *Titanic* on the jungle gym at school – found that she didn't.

She booked a Porsche commercial. Then she booked *The Safety of Objects.* Then David Fincher saw the Porsche commercial and had his people track her down, and she booked *Panic Room.* "I mean, everybody said at the time, 'Look, if this kid wants to continue to do this, she's absolutely got the acumen; she's got the sensitivity,' " Fincher tells me. "But when you're standing next to Jodie Foster, and the question for a 10- or 11-year-old is 'What do you want to do with the rest of your life?' – you know, Jodie's extremely protective of people who are not capable of making those decisions: 'She doesn't need to think about that. She needs to think about what we're doing before lunch.' "

NIKE
Air

BIKE
MEDIUM

Anyway, there was only so much Foster could do: When shit hit the fan for Stewart, career prospects had nothing to do with it. Puberty did. "It's as soon as I started to want to have sex," Stewart specifies of the moment in sixth grade when she went from being like "everything's fucking gravy" to suddenly feeling like "I can't find the words and I want my face to be on the back of my head instead of the front." She takes another gulp of Coors: "Puberty is a real fucker."

There are a few core memories here: the time she went to school with her legs unshaved and someone was like, "*Eeeewwww*"; the time she accidentally hit a friend in the nuts, and he howled "Oh, you fucking *man*!"; the way guys treated her girlie friend Britni vis-à-vis the way they treated her. "I was immediately aware that these guys who I was friends with saw me as not fuckable," she says. "My sexuality is totally fluid. I'm all over the fucking map – and I think I was then. But I also really wanted to be normal and hot, so I was like, 'Cool. I'm going to do everything I can to try and fucking figure out how to look like a girl and get these guys to like me.' That's it. It's totally a normal story." Except that it didn't play out normally because by then she was well on her way to filming movies like *Into the Wild* and *Adventureland* and – as part of her actual *Twilight* audition, believe it or not – rolling around with Pattinson on director Catherine Hardwicke's own bed.

Which means that while Stewart was still figuring out who she was and what being "fuckable" meant to her, the world was busy schooling her on both fronts. She couldn't leave the house without the male gaze following her in the form of TMZ photographers, couldn't arrange her face without becoming the cultural signifier of every single woman who's ever been told, "You're so much prettier when you smile." Plus, it was the aughts ("The Nineties and the early 2000s were really horrific for young women. Don't you feel that way?"). Her anxiety got so bad that she'd lie on bathroom floors, unable to unclench her fists – *so* bad, at one point she had to be hospitalized ("They were like, 'She's dehydrated.' I was like, 'I'm not dehydrated. I'm fucking flipping out.' They gave me an IV and a mild sedative, and I started calming down and my hands started opening up, because you fucking atrophy").

There was a span of years when she couldn't enter a room without scoping out the exits, when she needed to know where a bathroom was at all times ("I was always like, 'Who knows? I could spontaneously combust in a puddle of puke right now' "). There was that period when she couldn't sleep, and then got addicted to not sleeping, thought she might die from not sleeping, but then, somehow, didn't. "I loved to be sad and shit," she tells me. "Oh, my God. I made a complete art project out of it: my whole life."

Of course, all of that was a long time ago. Stewart wanders over to the fridge and gets us another round. Here's the thing: She's grown up. That's not who she is now. But also: In a way, it kind of is. As a queer woman in the public eye, she's had occasion to think about identity, and what it all means. She's considered the arc of things. "And it goes: Jodie [Foster], me, boygenius," she says, plainly, of the spots she imagines they all hold on the queer-celebrity continuum. "I'm in the middle. Do you know what I mean? Jodie had such a hard time [as a gay actor], and I'm not speaking for her – I am objectively analyzing the time and place in which she was being her, and that is not easy – I would say fucking near-impossible if you wanted to continue doing what you love.

"For me, it wasn't a problem," she continues. "But that's probably because of the sort of space that I inhabit and the parts that I'm attracted to and the filmmakers that are attracted to me and the audience that exists for those movies. Had I really wanted to carve out more commercial space and maintain that, I don't know if that would've worked."

Still, she points out that, for her, coming out was not a painstaking process. She was "very physically out with my body" long before she publicly came out on *SNL*. And even that was a "very shoot-from-the-hip moment," she says. "It did not feel like this bloodletting." Nor was it something she'd planned in advance. She was merely sitting with the *SNL* writers, going, "This is the most boring monologue ever. What are we going to do? What the fuck?" when someone brought up Trump's tweets about her. "He's mad at me for cheating on my boyfriend?" she'd retorted. "Little does he know…." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she knew she'd use them. (As for her thoughts on Trump? "Of course he had to weigh in on my tarring and feathering. It's like, 'What is this 20-year-old who has no idea about life doing to this *man*?' ")

"I loved to be sad and shit. Oh, my God. I made a complete art project out of it: my whole life."

And: "He's such a little baby." And also: "Fuck you, bitch!").

She says that Foster has been a mentor to her – a number she will keep in her phone always, even if they aren't consistently in touch – and she's aware that her own openness about her queerness has likely been a model for others. But she also knows how much the needle has kept moving, at least in the "specialized little nook" of the world where she resides. She directed boygenius' "The Film" – a 14-minute music video that culminates in the three musicians making out with one another – and she can see the evolution from herself to them, how she has an awareness of gender-conformity that feels very "millennial" compared with what's on offer now. "I look at these kiddos that are so chilling on all of those fronts, and can have [gender] be like an accessory, can actually play with the novelty of that – have [femininity] one day, not have it the next." It's a psychological fluidity Stewart covets: "I'm so aware of these things."

And so she did what she could: She leaned into that awareness. She began reading mainly female writers ("I was really obsessed with male writers. I've only recently been like, 'What the fuck are they doing?' "). She began boning up on gender theory, giving herself the college education that, in another life, she might have had. She began thinking of female bodies not just physically and sexually, but also metaphorically ("The coolest fucking part of us is that we have this ever-present and unclosable opening, and we're walking around with it all the time, and we sort of pretend like it's not there, but it's our greatest strength"). She began to interrogate the "violence of the dynamic" when it comes to gender, whether someone has had a #MeToo moment or not (she says that she hasn't). "The violence and the shame that women internalize and then use as triggers for pleasure? We can't get away from it," she says. "To think that we know what we want in a way that's remotely divorced from the patriarchy is impossible. We will never. And I'm so much more interested in leaning into that versus away." In other words, she began, as she puts it, "*Vagina Monologue*-ing all over the place."

Some years back, Stewart read a memoir that seemed to magically spew onto the page all that was cohering in her mind. Before she'd even finished *The Chronology of Water,* she emailed its author, Lidia Yuknavitch, asking if she could adapt her story, a cult favorite about female shame and female rage and female art and female-on-female BDSM and a bunch of other things "so taboo it's almost horny." It took Stewart years to complete the screenplay, which she refers to as a "living document." For several weeks while she was working on it, she camped in a van outside Yuknavitch's Pacific Northwest home. Then she read the script to Yuknavitch, out loud, in the writer's living room. Then she cast Imogen Poots to play Yuknavitch. Then she went looking for money to make the actual movie, which proved to be damn near impossible because, as it turns out, female shame and female rage and female art and female-on-female BDSM are topics that are not seen to lend themselves to box-office gold. Which only underscored how *every single fucking thing in the book was true.*

We'd been having a fairly chill time up until this point, but suddenly Stewart is standing up, pacing back and forth in front of the bookshelf. She knows her screenplay is "radical in a million ways." She knows she's never directed *The Tree of Life*. But she also knows the misogyny embedded in the system and that she could make something subversive and beautiful and true if only she were given the chance. "And it makes me fucking angry. And not in a way that's like, 'I've been doing this for so long, and so therefore I deserve it.' It's really more like, 'If I were a man, you would *fucking believe me!*' "

Stewart's voice has risen to the point that she is screaming now, over there by the books. Eventually she strides to the pool table and begins racking the balls.

"Do you want to play a game of pool?" she asks. "It's the party trick of any fledgling lesbian." It may be worth mentioning that we are not entirely sober at this point. Outside the window, it's too dark to tell if it's still raining.

Stewart chalks a cue and then leans over the table and breaks. It's soon clear that she's the better player: When she sinks a ball, it's swift and decisive. Still, she's distracted by the conversation. Have I read any Jeanette Winterson? Or Kate Zambreno? What about Genesis P-Orridge's memoir? That's an extreme experience! Do I realize that we are setting ourselves up for failure here, with this whole cover-story thing? That it's impossible to pin down any moment in time, any fixed identity? Still, she wants the cover image to

CLOTHING: SECOND SPREAD: VEST BY VENA CAVA. JOCKSTRAP BY BIKE ATHLETICS. THIRD SPREAD: SHIRT IS SUBJECT'S OWN. JEANS BY LEVI'S. FOURTH SPREAD: VINTAGE NIKE SHIRT FROM STRAN STARS BEST. UNDERWEAR BY COU COU. PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACKET: VINTAGE WINLIT. SHIRT IS SUBJECT'S OWN. THIS SPREAD: SHIRT: FABRICATED FOR SHOOT. SHORTS AND SOCKS: LA APPAREL. FOLLOWING SPREAD: SHIRT: VINTAGE ON HOLLYWOOD.

EAT ME

ANIMAL

send a clear message: hyper-sexualized, left of andro, and flipping the gender script. "If I got through the entire *Twilight* series without ever doing a ROLLING STONE cover, it's because the boys were the sex symbols," she points out. "Now, I want to do the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life. If I could grow a little mustache, if I could grow a fucking happy trail and unbutton my pants, I would. Guys – I'm sorry – but their fucking pubes are shoved in my face constantly, and I'm like, '*Ummmm,* bring it in.' "

Apropos to that, she won't give up on *Chronology,* she wants me to know. She's been talking about it with journalists for years – to the point that it's getting embarrassing – but it's now her only plan for the future. She'll keep writing things with Meyer, keep looking for other stories they could tell that she feels aren't being told, but she's not taking other parts; the next movie she films she wants to be her own.

I make a bank shot, and she looks at me with mock horror: "Now get the fuck out of my house."

BY THE TIME we plunk ourselves back down in her living room a few weeks later, Stewart seems more relaxed, and not just from the endorphins released by her millions of chin-ups. About a week before our first meeting, she'd traveled to Latvia to location-scout for *Chronology,* and had been astounded by the beauty and diversity of the landscape – beaches that looked like Florida just a few miles from forests that looked like the Pacific Northwest. She'd now calculated that the movie could be shot there for a fraction of the cost, and though it was weird for her to consider making a movie outside of the Hollywood system, she was coming around to the idea. With these set pieces, she felt she could keep the project small and intimate, could suspend that fragile bubble of make-believe. "I don't want 80 people on set," she says. "If I see a truck, I'll lose my fucking mind."

Over the years, Stewart's most intimate relationships have tended to be with people she views as creative partners, which, she admits, has "not been great for having relationships." When it comes to Meyer, she says, "we don't have that separation. I found the right person because I can be so obsessive about what I do. And luckily my girlfriend, my partner, we are into the same shit. We have taken the things that we're spending our time on and interlocked them, and we're so much fucking smarter and stronger together. And you're just like, 'Fuck, that is the best.' "

The two met on the set of *American Ultra,* connected immediately ("in a way where you aren't sure if you want to fuck or be like, 'Dude, let's think of a handshake' "), and then unconnected immediately because of other romantic entanglements ("We were both so wrapped up in fucking other things, literally"). Six years later, they ran into each other again. Stewart asked why they hadn't stayed in touch. Meyer said she'd emailed. Stewart scoffed and then – oops – pulled up all the messages she'd ghosted. "It was my fault, for sure," she says. "But then I very much made this [relationship] happen. I was intense, because I was just positive."

Which, she found, was an interesting place to be. For so much of her adulthood, Stewart had felt unsettled. Years had been spent "really white-knuckling life and getting off on the highs and lows of things" and running headlong into "fucking horrific relationships" and leaning into experiences that were "emotionally psychotropic" because you can then "put so much into your art." And art had come out of it, art she'd sometimes even been proud of, art where she's been able to "deposit desire in people" and make her feelings their feelings – and, honestly, what's fucking better than that? "There was never a moment where I was like, 'Man, what am I doing with the time that I have on this Earth?' " she says. "I don't know what the fuck else I'd be doing. I love it."

And, look, it has been great to experience all these facets of herself, great to try them on and then figure out how she wanted to cast herself in her real life, which – let's be honest – is what we all do, all the time: "We make choices every fucking day about who we're going to be. Not in a controlling way, but just in a way that acknowledges, 'This is who I am. It's the easiest one. It's the one that's the most comfortable. It's the one I've chosen.' "

But also – and bear with her here; she knows she's about to contradict herself – she's aware that there can be something fundamental to who we are that can be lost and hard to retrieve. "I feel like I'm just getting back to that 11-year-old," she says. "It does take kind of a long period of growing up in order to get back to who you were when you were a little guy." She knows these things "might seem like a contradiction, like I'm presenting something that doesn't play well together." She balks at the concept of "authenticity" ("Are you fucking kidding me? We are all so malleable"). But she still feels like maybe there's something essential that you feel the loss of when it's denied, something that can help you grow into who you once were and stick that out, because "it's boring to not. It is unevolved to not. Now, I'm actually creating a home where I'm an adult and a person."

"Now, I want to do the gayest fucking thing you've ever seen in your life."

A few years back, Stewart and Meyer moved into a house down the road, keeping this one to use as the offices of Nevermind and as a landing pad for friends going through breakups or other hard times, as Stewart was when she bought it (she refers to it as the "Heartbreak Hotel," adding that it's otherwise "crazy to have a secondary mansion down the street from your house"). Since Meyer proposed in 2021, they've thrown around ideas of how they want to get married, once joking (or half-joking? Or not joking?) that they wanted Guy Fieri to officiate. Since then, they've realized that their main focus needs to be their two passion projects – Stewart's *Chronology* and Meyer's *The Wrong Girls,* in which Stewart will star and which she describes as "a stoner buddy comedy about two slacker girls coming of age." It's the one movie that Stewart says that she would do if it got greenlit before *Chronology.* With all that percolating, Stewart explains, "we don't have it in us to have a big wedding. We're probably just going to do it soon. We just are busy trying to make movies because they're our babies."

Then again, they've been talking about the possibility of actual babies. "I don't know what my family's going to look like, but there's no fucking way that I don't start acquiring kids," Stewart told me during our first meeting. "And also, ideally at some point soon I go, 'I want to have a kid.' I really want that to happen." Having watched that desire solidify in so many of their friends, she and Meyer have started making preparations for how they might go about getting pregnant, and have discussed the possibility of carrying each other's embryos. "I'm not scared of being pregnant. I'm not scared of having a kid," Stewart tells me. "But I'm so fucking scared of childbirth, it's crazy. Have you ever been too on drugs where you've suddenly needed to be on your hands and knees?" she asks of that sensation of your body operating outside your control. "I hate that. I mean, I smoke a lot of weed – I obviously self-medicate – but I don't like hard drugs. And I've tried – a lot. I just can't deal." Still, the thought of carrying a pregnancy is so "radical" that she'd like to think she could be up for facing that fear.

Right now, though, she can't wrap her head around creating anything – or anyone – before *Chronology.* She hopes that by March she's in Latvia shooting – she'd love to get there in time to capture some scenes of snow. She shows me the locations deck she put together, then asks if I want to see the sizzle, then spends several minutes fumbling with a remote control ("You know when you're too fucked up and you're trying to get music to play? This is like that"). Finally, she gets the video going, the plot approximated in pastiche, the tone strange and dark and exuberant. *This* is who she is, is what she's trying to say; she just wants to be able to say it. Less talk, more rock.

So I turn my tape recorder off. We swill some more Coors. The Los Feliz skyline darkens. Eventually Meyer texts to see what's up, and we head to a dive bar a few minutes down the road where we sit at a booth and eat chicken wings and where not a single person approaches the table except the woman who takes our order. Stewart sits close to Meyer, who does most of the talking (about books, about writing, about how these are the best wings in Los Angeles to such an extent that "I'm not interested in other wings anymore"). Periodically, Stewart reaches out to gently touch Meyer's neck. At one point, they go outside to split the joint that's been hanging out behind Stewart's ear and return smiling and chummy. When the wings are done and the beers are finished, I call a car, and they wait outside with me until it arrives. They give good hugs, both of them.

Before we part ways for the final time, Stewart asks me again if I know what I'll write about her, which of course I don't. She's right: We've set ourselves up for failure with this whole cover-story thing. Identity is so fucking malleable, a series of choices made over and over again in service to something elusive. It can take so much strength to drown out all the noise and get to the point where you know how to make those choices in a way that feels true. So, yeah, I guess what I have to say is this: Kristen Stewart is strong as fuck – whatever the fuck that means.

PRODUCED BY RHIANNA RULE FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS. PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. STYLING BY OLGA MILL FOR CAA. HAIR BY ADIR ABERGEL FOR A-FRAME USING VIRTUE LABS. MAKEUP BY JILLIAN DEMPSEY FOR WALTER SCHUPFER MANAGEMENT USING JILLIAN DEMPSEY. NAILS BY ASHLIE JOHNSON FOR THE WALL GROUP. TAILORING BY LYDIA JAKUBOWSKI. SET DESIGN BY ALEX CONSTABLE AND CJ KEOSSAIAN FOR MAXIM JEZEK DESIGN. POSTPRODUCTION BY TWO THREE TWO STUDIO. PRODUCTION MANAGER: XAVIER HAMEL FOR PALM PRODUCTIONS. MODELS: GEORGIA STARNES, RHYS ATHAYDE, AND KANOR EBEHEAKEY FOR O MODELS AGENCY. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: JACK CLARKE AND DOUG STUCKEY. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY ALYSSA LESSER. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY ARIEL SADOK, JACK BUSTER, AND ALEXIS SOTOMAYER. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: MIKE PREMAN. HAIRSTYLING ASSISTANCE BY SELINA BOON. LOCATION: ESTLR ATHLETICS.

THE NEW COMEDY ALL-STARS

SURE, THE WORLD IS ON FIRE, BUT THESE ARE THE HILARIOUS VOICES CUTTING THROUGH THE NOISE

THE MAVERICK

RAMY YOUSSEF

The creator and star of *Ramy* opens up about family, growing up Muslim, and his upcoming stand-up special

BY ALAN SEPINWALL / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN J WEE

IN STAND-UP comedy, silence typically equals death. You tell a joke and the audience laughs? Great. You tell a joke and they groan? Well, at least they were interested enough to respond. Tell a joke and … nothing? You may have lost the room altogether.

For Ramy Youssef, though, a joke greeted with silence allowed him to find his comedic voice, which has expanded beyond his stand-up to include creating and/or starring in a pair of acclaimed comedy series — *Ramy* on Hulu, *Mo* on Netflix — a juicy supporting role in Yorgos Lanthimos' *Poor Things,* and an upcoming comedy special based on his current *More Feelings* tour.

Youssef's early stand-up act was basic stuff. "I talked about dating a lot," he says in a Brooklyn coffee shop on a frigid January morning. In time, though, he began delving more deeply into his life as the child of Egyptian immigrants, and, especially, about being a practicing Muslim.

"I remember doing this one set at a bar," he recalls. "I was like, 'I've been fasting for Ramadan. I do it because I actually believe in it.' And there was silence. Then I thought, 'Oh, that's interesting.' It was a type of silence where I was like, 'Did I just say something edgy?' And then I thought, 'Oh, yeah. This is what I've been trying to get at.' "

As his act evolved, he figured it out. He developed a bit about how the hardest part of being Muslim is that you go to mosque on Fridays, before the weekend, whereas Christians don't have to go to church until after they've partied: "It's such a worse position to have to pre-apologize. It feels so much nicer to do it and then say 'Sorry.' " As the routine began to connect with the audience, he felt emboldened, "because this is fully me, but it's also in reference to the culture that I'm surrounded by."

By the time Youssef did a set on *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert* in 2017, he had grown so confident in the material

about his faith that he was willing to take a stand for it. In a couple of recent stage performances, he had closed his act by saying, "I'm not trying to be preachy, I'm really not. All I'm trying to say is, just submit to Islam, because it's the truth. And that's the only way you'll be saved. Seriously!" Both times, it got huge laughs. But Youssef says the *Late Show* producers were so nervous about the joke that they told him, "If you fight us on this, we're not going to let you do the set." He pushed for a compromise: He would close with "Submit to Islam," and if they still felt uncomfortable, they could edit it out of the aired version. Instead, it killed.

Growing up in northern New Jersey, Youssef, 32, didn't envision a future in comedy. "I never had this larger ambition, because I didn't even think it was feasible. It didn't feel real." Though the Arab American Comedy Festival and Axis of Evil Comedy Tour both began picking up notice when Youssef was a teenager, there wasn't a long list of famous Muslim comics.

By the time he was in college, the idea of performing had taken root. He dropped out of school and improbably landed a role on *See Dad Run,* a Nick at Nite sitcom starring Scott Baio, four years before the *Happy Days* alum became one of the highest-profile Trump supporters in the entertainment industry.

As he is onstage, Youssef is soft-spoken, upbeat, and empathetic in person, always looking for the good in people and situations. With half of his extended family living in America and half in the Middle East, "every opinion that exists on Earth is in my family." So he was raised on the idea of loving people even when you vehemently disagree with them. Here was Baio, who was espousing beliefs diametrically opposed to Youssef's, but who was also pushing for the *See Dad Run* writers to give his young co-star better material. "I was just like, 'Oh, yeah. You care about other humans when you're in front of them.' And then there's this whole other part, the public piece, that might look like it's in conflict with that."

See Dad Run also introduced him to comedian Mark Curry, who invited Youssef to open for him on tour. Even though Axis of Evil and other Arab comics like *Mo* star Mo Amer had been out there for a few years, Youssef entered a stand-up world that still seemed confused by his existence. "There was this thing of, on a baseline level, 'Wait, do Muslims laugh? Do they condone comedy?' That's how in the gutter some of it was."

In addition to providing new career opportunities, stand-up became cathartic for Youssef, who eventually used his time onstage to talk about what it was like to be Muslim in America, living only miles from Ground Zero, in the months and years after 9/11.

"I don't even know that I fully realized how it affected my psychology, being 11, 12 around that period," he admits. "It took me a really long time to say, 'Oh, wait....' To cope, I tried to downplay it. But it affected every single thing my parents did. Every decision they made." Though Youssef was never the victim of hate crimes, he felt the world looking at him differently for a long time after the Twin Towers fell. He eventually turned this into material in his act, as well as on *Ramy,* which devoted an early episode to a young version of the fictionalized Ramy Hassan imagining a conversation with Osama bin Laden.

"I DON'T EVEN KNOW THAT I FULLY REALIZED HOW IT AFFECTED MY PSYCHOLOGY, BEING 11, 12 AROUND 9/11."

He tried turning the anti-Muslim sentiment to his professional advantage, auditioning early in his career for the kind of terrorist roles that had become ubiquitous over the previous decade. He didn't get them — "They would go, 'Oh, you're not scary enough' " — which was a relief in hindsight. The day before our conversation, he was at Madison Square Garden to watch the Knicks beat the Minnesota Timberwolves, and ran into Jon Stewart, whose work on *The Daily Show* in the 2000s had meant so much to him during such a difficult time.

"I had this moment with him where I was like, 'Dude, what you did with news — I remember being in high school and just watching so much of who we were get pummeled.' And then you watch Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert, and you're like, 'Oh, my God. You are shining a light on this thing that feels so dark.' It was so cool to say that to him."

If 2017 was a pivotal professional year for Youssef, 2019 was when his career exploded. In April, Hulu premiered *Ramy,* which Youssef co-created and based on his own life and struggles. In June, HBO released *Ramy Youssef: Feelings,* an intimate comedy special shot by *Ramy* director (and future *The Bear* creator) Christopher Storer. There's some overlap between the two — in *Feelings,* Youssef argues that it's OK to be attracted to your cousins, while on the series, Ramy begins actively flirting with a cousin on a trip to Egypt — and the one-two punch dramatically raised Youssef's public profile.

Just as non-Jews everywhere know what "mazel tov!" means, Youssef had long believed that "inshallah," "haram," and "halal" should be part of the non-Muslim vernacular. As the Hulu show took off, two-time Oscar winner Mahershala Ali called Youssef to personally thank him for a Season One *Ramy* episode that discussed how to figure out when Eid happens — a subject that had caused problems in the past when Ali's agents tried booking him for work around Ramadan. "He was like, 'Dude, you made it easier to explain the end of Ramadan to my people at WME. Thank you.' " Seizing on the connection, Youssef persuaded Ali to guest star throughout the second season as a sheikh who mentors Ramy Hassan, and even marries Ramy to his daughter, only for Ramy to ruin everything by sleeping with his Egyptian cousin right before the wedding.

If there's one regret Youssef has about the Hulu show, it's that he named it, and the character, after himself, inspiring people to confuse him with the guy he's playing. The real Ramy says he's much better at learning lessons and sticking with them, whereas the TV version keeps making the same mistakes and hurting people along the way. Before the series premiered, he refused to show or tell his parents anything about it, because "I wanted to give them plausible deniability" when friends asked about the many bad things Ramy Hassan did. After they watched it for the first time, he was finally able to have a series of deep conversations with them about the show, his beliefs and actions in real life, and more.

This led to "my arrival into a full adult relationship with my parents," whom he describes as "my best friends now." Much of the new special, he says, will be about that shift between the three of them.

The third season, which began streaming in the fall of 2022, features a darkly hilarious episode in which Ramy visits Israel on business and gets himself into a series of escalating calamities that somehow culminate in him helping the Israeli Defense Forces arrest a Palestinian boy. Logistically, it would be impossible to make such an episode now, in the midst of so much bloodshed in the region. Even the idea of wringing laughs out of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians seems far more daunting than it did two years ago. But Youssef, ever an optimist, sees a tiny silver lining.

"I've been working on a lot of different versions of the [new] set over the last two, three years," he says. "And what's interesting is how much it was already discussing a lot of this stuff, through a very personal lens. There was probably a small bridge that I was building to bring people into certain things. In a way, I almost don't need that bridge anymore, because everyone's in on it, and there is an immediate recognition of the moment that we're in. And so for me, it is the tightest tightrope I've walked. And it also feels like one of the few things that I can actually contribute in such a helpless situation."

That level of earnestness must have spoken to Lanthimos when he hired Youssef to play Max McCandles, the naive doctor tasked with observing the evolution of Emma Stone's Frankenstein-esque Bella Baxter, in *Poor Things.* As someone who has tried to direct more and more episodes of *Ramy* (and even *The Bear*) as his career has evolved, he was thrilled to work for a directing idol of his.

Youssef delayed the filming of *Ramy*'s third season so he could do *Poor Things.* Netflix already announced that *Mo* — a more overtly political show, with Mo Amer as an undocumented immigrant — will end with its upcoming second season. Though a fourth season of *Ramy* has yet to be ordered as of press time, Youssef says he's talked with Hulu about the idea of taking a long break, then returning to depict Ramy Hassan in a new stage of his life. "It's definitely not over," he insists.

In *Feelings,* Youssef jokes, "Nobody wants you to be *that* Muslim. Everyone just wants you to have, like, a good hummus recipe. Like, they wanna know about baba ganoush, not Allah." The past five years of his career have proved otherwise.

During the early days of Covid, he was invited to go on an outdoor walk with his boss of bosses, Disney chairman Bob Iger, who was impressed with *Ramy.* "He goes, 'It's really interesting. Your character actually wants to be religious. And when I was watching your show, I couldn't believe it hadn't been done before, because it's right under our nose. But it's like you flipped it.' He really understood why the show worked. I think that it actually does connect with everybody. And I think that everyone who finds the show feels that." R

HAIR BY ANDREA GRANDE-CAPONE. GROOMING BY ABIGAIL HAYDEN. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY DANA GOLAN.

THE NEW QUEEN OF CABARET

CATHERINE COHEN

A health scare nearly derailed her burgeoning comedy career, but for Cohen, everything is copy

BY KASE WICKMAN
PHOTOGRAPH BY GRIFFIN LOTZ

COMEDIAN CATHERINE Cohen had a hole in her heart, and there was only one thing that could mend it: a visit from Dr. Love.

Actually, any number of cardiologists probably could have helped, but it was Dr. Love at Mount Sinai on the Upper East Side who came to Cohen's aid when she suffered a mini stroke last summer, which led to the discovery that she'd had a hole in her heart since birth, a condition called PFO. That her doctor's name sounds like it belongs in a made-for-TV movie about a charming comedian stumbling through life in New York City, right into the arms of a handsome cardiologist? That's par for the course in Cohen's life, one of the things that she singsong-ingly characterizes as a "lady in a *mooooovie*" moment in her stand-up act.

The health scare was a brick wall positioned squarely in the path of her comedy career, which was rapidly gaining momentum — the surgery to repair the hole, her big date with Dr. Love, forced her to cancel an appearance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and other shows.

And it came on the heels of her Netflix special, *The Twist…? She's Gorgeous,* which was released in 2022 — an hour of Cohen gasping and squealing and singing from the stage of Joe's Pub in Manhattan, whirling around in a hot-pink romper absolutely *duh-ripp-ing* with rhinestones. Netflix touts her special as "a sparkling cocktail of stand-up and song," in Cohen's recollection, "which I thought was really actually well said. Shout-out. I think one of the things is like, 'quirky,' and what's quirky about it? Being a size 12? Is that quirky? What do you mean? Woman screaming, is that quirky?"

If she could have a stab at those descriptors, she might add "screaming in sequins. New York. Loud. Sad. Gross — but beautiful!"

Yet overall, Cohen calls the special's impact on her career "magical." It built on her teeming Instagram fan base and the audiences of a recurring live show at New York's Club Cumming, called "Cabernet Cabaret." Then there's her podcast, *Seek Treatment,* co-hosted by fellow "criminally under-famous comedian" Pat Regan — as she's called her bestie — and her poetry collection, 2021's *God I Feel Modern Tonight: Poems From a Gal About Town,* which features compositions like "poem I wrote after I sent three guys the same nude" and "poem I wrote after I didn't drink for six days and thought about starting a cult." Cohen has a presence in seemingly every medium, and had a full slate of shows that looked like they'd truly take her career to the next level. But: Stroke. Unasked for! Uncalled for!

Now, things are back on track. This year, Cohen embarks on a tour that has her shuffling from city to city through May. She hopes to make up for that missed festival in Edinburgh and maybe chip away at a proposal for a book of comedic essays. She has her sights set on a new special. It seems like the demand she's been making for years in one of her signature songs, "Look at Me," is going to be fulfilled.

Cohen's routine covers sex, the internet, the very specific but somehow widespread belief that a weekend in upstate New York heals all wounds, the aforementioned "lady in a movie" feeling (Holding a baguette? Lady in a movie!), and more. She's an energetic mouthpiece for those suffering the mundane indignities of the period of adulthood when you're no longer an entry-level human, but you're not quite qualified to be a Senior Director of Adults yet. At 32, Cohen is a self-described "girl in her young thirties."

In her act, Cohen comes off as your sparkliest, funniest, tipsiest friend going off at brunch. In real life, sipping a mint tea in a midtown chain cafe, she's the same. Relationships, rent prices, style — she briefly covets a fellow customer's ankle-length leopard-print overcoat before realizing, cackling, that it's super similar to the coat she's already wearing — nothing is really off-limits. She kind of has a millennial Nora Ephron everything-is-copy type of thing going on — Dr. Love is sure to find a place in upcoming material, she says.

The twist of Cohen's comedy (apart from being gorgeous) is that it really could go anywhere — like our conversation. We discuss her hobby of painting portraits of her friends' dogs (she used to use oils but switched because they're too messy and "definitely not photorealistic"); who she'd swap bodies with for a day (LSU gymnast Livvy Dunne, because "I've never been flexible. I've never been able to do a cartwheel. I would love to feel strong and fast for one day. My whole life has been me, like, walking around the track and everyone else runs. I would love to feel lithe." On second thought? "Honestly, I would swap with anyone who can do a push-up without being on their knees"); and astrology (Leo sun, Virgo moon, Pisces rising, though that whole thing where her horoscope never predicted a life-threatening health scare kind of shifted her views on it).

Cohen is grappling with a lot of the same things her peers are: relationships, health, debating what Taylor Swift era she truly is in her soul (*Reputation,* I'll tell), career, aging. She ponders her waning tolerance to alcohol.

"I guess everyone says that will happen when you get older, and it's happening," she says, and can't resist poking fun at herself yet again. "Every cliché is true. I'm just like, 'OK, I'm a cliché. Everything I like is what everyone else likes. Great.' I'm the most uninteresting girl in the world. And yet I insist on talking about myself."

But then the most uninteresting girl in the world checks herself, lest she wreck herself.

"At the end of [last] year, with the strike and everything, I was like, what a slow, weird bummer of a year. And then [when] I looked back, I was like, wait, no. Actually, Catherine? Stop being a little bitch. You had a really cool year. And you escaped death."

TAYLOR TOMLINSON

THE SURVIVOR

The stand-up comic opens up about hosting *After Midnight*, conquering her fear of death, and idolizing Taylor Swift

BY BRIAN HIATT
PHOTOGRAPH BY TRACY NGUYEN

AS ANYONE WHO'S laughed uncomfortably at Taylor Tomlinson's "dead mom" jokes is well aware, her mother died of cancer when she was eight years old. (She used to tell friends her parents were separated — which they were, she argued onstage, "by Jesus.") Tomlinson's mom lived to be just 34 years old, a fact that's always floated on the edge of her daughter's consciousness as a sort of cosmic deadline, pushing her to hit milestones in her comedy career at a nearly freakish pace. "I've done a lot of work on that in therapy, my specific fear of, like, dying at a specific age," Tomlinson says, a couple of months after her own 30th birthday.

She's sitting in the lobby of her Manhattan hotel on a Sunday afternoon in January, days before her debut as the only woman hosting a show on late-night television. Last year, she had the seventh-highest-grossing comedy tour in the world, selling nearly 300,000 tickets for 132 shows — far more dates than the other comedians in the top 10, all of whom are middle-aged men. She's already on her third Netflix special, *Have It All,* and has taken over James Corden's old 12:30 a.m. slot on CBS with the very internet-y variety show *After Midnight,* built around Tomlinson and revolving panels of comedians riffing on memes and other online detritus. (Choosing her as a host was a no-brainer, says executive producer Stephen Colbert: "Taylor is funny. And a lovely person. And a leader. And a pro. And did I mention she's fucking funny?") In her spare time, Tomlinson and her writing partner, Taylor Tetreau, turn out screenplays — they've sold several, including one based on Tomlinson's life.

"I was afraid I was gonna die at 34," she says without noticeable emotion. "OK, well, I did all the things I wanted to do before then. So I think maybe that's where some of the fear has been alleviated. Because I'm like, 'Well, I sprinted — and it worked.' "

Though she's gotten a huge career boost from TikTok, where she has 2.6 million followers and what seems to be a steady presence on the FYP's of millions more, Tomlinson's comedy has a throwback quality to it. (TikTok fame is weird — young "fans" from the platform tend to approach her, she says, without actually knowing her name.) There's a nearly vaudevillian — or at least Johnny Carson-era — tightness to her sets' structures and her delivery. She attributes some of that polish to starting off in comedy as a teenager, on a church circuit she's long since abandoned, along with her family's religiosity. "Starting so young, I felt that I needed to make the audience feel comfortable," she says. "Because I felt people being nervous for me. I didn't want people to anticipate being disappointed by someone who was a child."

She used to spend hours practicing tiny details as a high schooler: "It was very premature. But you had to come at it with a different level of preparation. As opposed to a cool L.A. comedian kid, hanging out and smoking weed and then trying a few ideas in a coffee shop. That wasn't the way I started. I just wasn't cool."

On that level, and many others, Tomlinson feels a commonality with a hero of hers, Taylor Swift. "I know there's an interview with her where she was like, 'I'm not cool or edgy, I work really hard.' And I feel that way, too. At a certain point, you go, 'Look, I'm not one of the cool kids.' And I think knowing yourself in that way, and accepting that, and leaning into it is the best way to approach a creative career."

She was, however, way too edgy for the lucrative church circuit, which she mixed in with standard comedy venues early on. She realized she had to abandon it forever after a church fired her when she tweeted a pretty mild sex joke. ("I'm a wild animal in bed, way more afraid of you than you of me.") In any case, after growing up in a family so religious that her dad banned *Powerpuff Girls* because a character looked like Satan, she didn't even consider herself a Christian. She traces her loss of faith to her mom's death, when everyone around her who had been promising divine intervention in her illness shifted to telling her that God has a reason for everything. "I didn't like that answer," Tomlinson says, deadpan, before sharing her realization, at age eight, of what you could call the central joke of the universe: "Anything can happen. You're not special or safe."

Tomlinson was so sheltered that she had to google "stand-up comedy" to find out what it was after seeing a random comedian in a YouTube clip — she'd never seen anyone being funny onstage who wasn't a youth pastor. She started doing her own stand-up after taking a comedy class with her dad, and instantly took to it. "I don't think I felt seen or heard as a kid," Tomlinson says. "And getting people to see and hear and understand me is a big part of what drew me to comedy."

There's also anger bubbling under the tautness of Tomlinson's comedy, especially her earlier work. "I think I have less anger now," she says. "Because I've been really lucky. And the more grateful you are, the less angry you are. Plus, mood stabilizers." She hasn't hesitated to share details of her mental-health issues, from anxiety to a relatively recent diagnosis of bipolar disorder. (She mused onstage about trying to look on the bright side of the latter development: "Am I hot and/or talented enough to be an inspiration?")

Her jokes about her dad have gotten increasingly dark. "If someone called me a whore in bed, I'd be like, 'Excuse me, that's what my father calls me,' " she says in her new special. On *After Midnight,* she's joked that the comedians are competing for an impossible-to-obtain prize: "My father's approval." In fact, Tomlinson and her three siblings have stopped speaking to him, though she doesn't want to go into the details.

All of her siblings identify as queer, and Tomlinson, who's dated only men, acknowledges in her new special that she's starting to have some doubts about her own sexuality. Other than that, though, she's feeling pretty "settled" as her thirties begin. "Thirty feels like, 'OK, I'm me now,' which is what everyone told me 30 would be like. And I'm happy to report that it is the case."

> **"I THINK I HAVE LESS ANGER NOW.... AND THE MORE GRATEFUL YOU ARE, THE LESS ANGRY YOU ARE. PLUS, MOOD STABILIZERS."**

The CBS show is the first time in her life that she's had an actual job, which she's still getting used to. "I have a badge," she says. "I've never gone into a [studio] lot with a badge. It's just been like, 'Hi, it's me. Last name is Tomlinson.' And they're like, 'We don't have you in the system.' " She also has a writers' room, which feels like pure luxury. "It's so funny to me when everybody's like, 'You're so good at reading prompters,' " she says. "And I'm like, 'Great people wrote me great jokes that I just have to deliver.' I've been writing my own hour and a half of material that I have to do from memory. Like, this is awesome! What a sweet gig."

She's wary of overhyping her only-woman-in-late-night status, especially when people act like it's never happened before, or that all previous women somehow failed in that slot. "I mean, Chelsea Handler was very popular," she says. "Like, what are you talking about? Samantha Bee went for seven seasons. I don't get [how] everyone's like, 'Oh, it hasn't gone well.' I don't think that's true. I struggle with the right balance of being like, 'It's very cool.' And also being like, 'Let's not make this such a thing.' " In any case, *After Midnight* isn't even a talk show, so Tomlinson feels somewhat apart from the conversation.

She was hesitant about taking on the job until she learned the show would only tape three days a week, which would leave room to continue her relentless touring schedule. "That's never going to be a thing where I'm just like, 'I don't tour anymore,' " she says. "Because the only reason anybody cares about me is that I do stand-up, that I got good at stand-up. And that has gotten me every opportunity I've ever had. And it's the thing I like more than anything else."

Plus, a show like *After Midnight*, even if it's wildly successful, isn't necessarily a decades-long commitment. "I have no idea how long this will go," Tomlinson says. "I'm trying to predict the future less, because I figured out I can't. And this opportunity coming up was something I was surprised that I really wanted."

Another obvious direction for a wildly popular young comedian would be a semi-autobiographical sitcom — but Tomlinson already tried that. When she was in her early twenties, a development deal at ABC led to a pilot script that the network didn't end up giving her a chance to make. "Thank God, we didn't," she says, "because I would have been off the road." She's more interested in movies, though she finds the development process maddeningly slow.

There's another obvious possibility, though. Holding down the 12:30 a.m. slot, even if it's not a standard talk show, inevitably opens the door for someday taking over one of the network shows an hour earlier. Tomlinson seems genuinely shocked at the idea. "I have no idea," she says. "I have not thought about any of that." She pauses, and it's hard not to see a gleam of possibility in her eyes — maybe there are still some career milestones left to hit. "I truly have not thought about that at all — until you said it."

HAIR BY KIKI HEITLOTTER AT THE WALL GROUP. MAKEUP BY AMBER DREADON AT A-FRAME. STYLED BY TARA SWENNEN AT WITH FALCON. PHOTOGRAPHIC ASSISTANCE BY ALEX WOOD. PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE ASTER, HOLLYWOOD.

THE PHENOM

DRUSKI

Drew Desbordes took over TikTok with dead-on impressions. Now, he's taking on comedy on his own terms

BY DELISA SHANNON
PHOTOGRAPHS BY FARIS BIENEMY

WHEN KEVIN HART tells you to "stop being a bitch," you listen. "He was like, 'Put the grind in. Put the hustle in,'" says Druski, a viral comedian known for racking up millions of views on his made-for-social sketches. "'Do the hard work, do the stand-up.'" But even though this legend of the craft was telling him how to advance his career, it wasn't for him.

"I didn't have a love for it," the comedian, 29, says from the Los Angeles rental where he'd spent the past six months, as he packs up to head home to Atlanta. Druski got his start making off-the-cuff skits, acting out familiar characters — from a frat star to a country bumpkin — and had taken off with his series as the audacious CEO of fictional Coulda Been Records. With Hart's counsel, he set out on a 30-plus-stop tour blending his comedic acting with a bit of stand-up. He performed for friends and popped into several open mics along the way to workshop his material for the road — but it still wasn't clicking. "You try to make others happy, but you soon learn that it's not really about forcing what the ancestors of comedy believe is right."

That intuition for what his fans want from him has allowed Druski — born Drew Desbordes — to blaze a path to superstardom. He's held down opening slots for Lil Baby and J. Cole, landed roles in streaming movies, and appeared in commercials for brands like Google, Bud Light, and Nike — C.J. Stroud of the Houston Texans even quoted him in a postgame presser — all while brushing aside the traditional

gatekeepers. "We don't need anybody to tell us we can be on that TV show, or to kiss up to somebody to try to get in that door," he says. "I think it's just amazing that I can create my fan base."

The dinner table was Druski's first stage. His mom, Cheryl Desbordes, helped him cultivate his comedic chops at a young age, plopping him down in front of the family video camera to hone his imitations. "It was just a lot of opportunities for Drew to learn," says Desbordes. "All that time and emotional energy. I can see it in how he does his comedy."

Desbordes was also the one to spark Druski into taking his comedy seriously. Living at home in his early twenties, Druski rearranged the family room to create an interrogation scene for a sketch. "I remember my mom came home in the middle of that skit, and she just started screaming, 'What are you doing? You need to get a job, you are too old,'" he remembers. "I cried a little bit after seeing her cry. I was embarrassed."

With that moment as fuel, Druski dialed in. He grew his social media following from 4,000 to millions, creating characters like a rabid Alabama football fan, a TSA agent too hype off a power trip, and a guy who somehow always just got out of prison. In 2019, he struck up a lovable bromance with then-budding rapper Jack Harlow; Druski would join Harlow on tour, providing him more opportunities to find new inspirations for characters. Drake was paying attention and cast Druski in his "Laugh Now, Cry Later" music video. A year later, Drake and Druski would reunite on Instagram Live for more than 200,000 fans, causing the app to malfunction. "It just started to glitch, and I was like, 'I have to expand this,'" Druski says.

These days, all of his work falls under his production company, 4Lifers Entertainment, which consists of friends from his hometown and a collection of creatives he has picked up along the way. "We make sure when we sign these deals with any of these big companies that my team is involved in the creative side," says Druski. "I have a team full of young Black writers that I grew up with, and they help me be the best me."

His rise hasn't been without controversy. In 2022, he posted a skit — called "That Friend that tries to make the girls OVERLY drink" — where he played a man who encourages women to excessively imbibe so he can sexually assault them. Audiences were split. Some commended Druski for calling out this behavior, while others felt that joking about rape was insensitive. "I think I just played the character too well," he says, discussing the subject for the first time.

After the controversy bubbled up, he took the clip down. "I didn't want to continue to trigger people," he says. "It's always coming from a good place." But Druski isn't done exposing this kind of behavior. His characters often touch on misogynistic standards and the early signs of emotional toxicity in relationships. "I was like, 'Yo, you have to remember this is the same stuff that I've been doing. This is my comedic voice.'"

As for what's next, his plans are to continue mastering that chameleonic gift. And he wants to get back out on the road for another comedy tour — this time with less pressure to follow a past mold and more fire to create his own. "The new grind is how to create your own fan base and how to entertain the world in different ways," he says. "Same thing, different hustle." ®

THE REBEL

ZAINAB JOHNSON

The Muslim comic is enlightening and cracking up audiences by riffing on her roots in her stand-up special, *Hijabs Off*

BY MEAGAN JORDAN
PHOTOGRAPH BY MARIA-JULIANA ROJAS

ZAINAB JOHNSON never intended to be a comedian. Born in Brooklyn and raised in Harlem with her 12 siblings, she was neither the family jokester nor the class clown.

"I always considered myself a very serious person," she says. "I'm the person that is annoyed by the class clown, and that's what's funny about me: The class clown is going to get on my nerves, and I'm going to tell everybody and imitate him or her."

But around the age of 10, her mother sneaked her into Harlem's Uptown Comedy Club to watch her first stand-up performance. Her mom's decision to bring Johnson was random — she could have taken her husband or one of Johnson's four older siblings — but she picked her. When Johnson tells me about the trip that became the first of many steps leading to a career in comedy, it was as if she was always destined to be on the stage.

Now, two decades later, Johnson has performed stand-up at local clubs across the country, is a regular on the Amazon science-fiction comedy-drama series *Upload,* and co-hosts the quirky Netflix documentary series *100 Humans: Life's Questions, Answered* — and last fall, she scored her very own Prime Video hour-long special, *Hijabs Off.* Johnson's set balances the intersections of her identity as a Black woman, her large family, navigating the dating minefield, and her faith — while also poking fun at Hollywood's lame attempts at promoting diversity and inclusion. "I got three strong ones," Johnson says in the special. "I'm Black, I'm a woman, and I'm Muslim. That's the diversity trifecta."

Johnson opens the show by asking the audience if there are "any Muslims in the house?" followed by the greeting "*Al salam 'alaykum*." The crowd roars back "*Wa 'alaykumu s-salam*."

Then, she jokes matter-of-factly, "We ain't never seen that on a comedy special." It's a moment that exposes the scarcity of Muslim voices in the comedy world. Johnson's raw honesty onstage is paired with immaculate comedic timing, making her viewers both howl with laughter and reflect on their culture.

"I be out in the street with a ripped jean. I'm good for a hole in the knee," Johnson jokes as she describes why the "haram police" are often after her for her sartorial choices. The day we talk in Manhattan, Johnson wears wide-legged jeans, a sheer lemon-colored tank top, and pointed heels. "The guys, they got to go out there and march for us," she continues. "They gotta be like, 'Let the ladies show their knees. We don't care about no knee.' Think about it. Have you ever heard a guy be like, 'Yo, the one with the knee?! *Ughhh!*' " she says with a moan that sends the crowd into a fit of laughter. "Have you ever heard that? Like, 'It was the knee for me!' "

Johnson's parents were both raised Christian, and converted to Islam later on in their lives. Her father joined the Nation of Islam while in the Navy during the Civil Rights era, when many Black people were in search of a new spiritual identity to combat the racism they experienced in America. Her mother converted in college after never relating to the Bible's stories.

Johnson remembers religion being a bright spot in her family's life. But she faced discrimination and bullying, as well. As a child who wore a khimar, a headscarf covering her head, neck, and shoulders, she was constantly asked questions about her hair, ranging from its texture to its very existence. When she was in second and third grade, she recalls, she got her khimar pulled off her head.

Then there were the twin struggles of not seeing positive representations of herself in popular media and watching her friends get all the dating attention. It wasn't until her schoolwide dress-up day, sporting her older sister's Junior ROTC uniform and wearing her hair out, that Johnson realized just how differently she was perceived.

"I'M BLACK, I'M A WOMAN, AND I'M MUSLIM. THAT'S THE DIVERSITY TRIFECTA."

"It was like the movies, when the girl takes off her glasses and comes down the stairs. Everybody was like, 'You're so pretty, you have so much hair.' Once I got that, I didn't want to go back. It was peer pressure," Johnson says.

She finally stopped wearing her hijab for good to play basketball. She says, "I would have stopped wearing it earlier because I didn't like it. Nobody ever made me feel good about it. I was Black and I was wearing a hijab, and I got bullied.... It was the first time I had a viable excuse to convince my father. I'm not proud of that, but that's the truth."

Johnson's relationship with her family often takes center stage in her comedy performances. On *Late Night With Seth Meyers,* she told a story of growing up in a big family — in her signature dry and skeptical delivery.

"I am one of 13. My mom wanted 20. She made it to 13. When I was in second grade, she had kid number 10. And I was like, 'This has got to stop,' " Johnson starts, breaking into a wide smile. "I asked my mom to get her tubes tied when I was in second grade. I have no idea how I found out about tube tying. Maybe I was so fed up I sat in front of a stack of encyclopedias and was like, 'There has to be an answer!' "

While her mom was raising Johnson and her siblings, she was also studying theater at Queens College. She had her kids perform a scene from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* for one of her class assignments.

"I remember it because I knew we weren't supposed to be there," Johnson tells me with a laugh. "We memorized it [traveling] from Harlem to Queens College. That was the amount of time we had to work on what she gave us."

Johnson, who played Beneatha — the independent and college-focused sister of Walter Younger — learned that she was a natural. Following their performance, and a passing grade, Johnson's mother told her, "My professor said it was because of you. [They said] *that* daughter of yours." And still, Johnson hadn't caught the performing-arts bug. "I didn't take that as 'Let me pack my stuff and go to L.A.,' " she says, and recalls joking to her mother, " 'Why you had us go to *your* school?!' "

Instead of fully committing to theater, Johnson dove headfirst into athletics, dabbling in track and field before settling in as a small forward/point guard in basketball. As a freshman at Harlem's Manhattan Center high school, she helped the varsity team make it all the way to Madison Square Garden for the state championship.

By her senior year, Johnson had plans to play basketball at Spelman College in Atlanta, and maybe go on to the WNBA one day. "I had aspirations to go professional, even if it meant going overseas," she recalls. "But I got hit by a truck, and that changed everything."

She was "changed physically," she says, and is now legally disabled. "It took a long time for me to heal" from getting hit, Johnson says. "Once I got past that, it was like, 'Well, God, what did I do to deserve that?' And then it moved into a space of gratitude. There was another girl that got hit, and I remember thinking that my situation was so bad, and then seeing her shifted my worldview."

After Johnson's recovery, she took another stab at basketball, playing for the City College of New York, which led to an ACL tear. So she pivoted to academics, pursuing a degree in education and mathematics to become a high school math teacher. But she didn't stay on that path for long.

"I met a girl who was a spoken-word artist and was into music, and we became best friends," Johnson says. "She was like, 'When I graduate, I'm moving to L.A.,' and I was like, 'All right, I guess this is the plan?' "

When her father died in 2005, things all came into focus for Johnson.

"It was a good motivator for me because I realized I didn't want to have any regrets," Johnson tells me. "My father's death was sudden, health-related but sudden. I spent a lot of time with my mom and my siblings, and it made me realize time is of the essence and tomorrow isn't promised. I knew life was out there for me to find, and knew I had greater aspirations, but I didn't know what it was. Then a couple years later, comedy revealed itself."

Once in L.A., she googled "open mics near me" and wrote five-minute sets about not eating pork, her "criminal brother," and her parents having 13 children. The crowd responded well, and she found her new purpose. As she transitioned into longer sets, higher-ups in the entertainment world took notice.

Her profile was raised considerably after advancing as a semifinalist on *Last Comic Standing* in 2014. She's since been featured on HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show,* Hulu's *Ramy,* and has more projects on the horizon. When she looks back on her path here, it all makes sense — each twist and turn. Like it was always supposed to happen.

"I'm looking forward to telling my own story and meeting new fans on the road," she says. "*Hijabs Off* opened me up to a larger audience, but the sky is not the limit. We are going beyond the sky. I can't plan what God has for me. I'm just going to walk knowing that I'm going through doors, and what's through those doors, that's God."

HAIR BY PORSCHE WALDO. MAKEUP BY MERRELL HOLLIS.

NEXT-GEN COMICS

TIKTOK'S NEW LAUGH FACTORY

They took to the app to launch their stand-up careers, but what they found was a whole different kind of future in comedy

BY CT JONES / ILLUSTRATION BY GUILLEM CASASÚS

WHEN MORGAN Jay was cast on a prime-time TV show, he thought he'd finally gotten his big break.

A musical comic since 2007, Jay was sure his 2019 multi-episode appearance on NBC's *Bring the Funny* would take his career from long nights and low pay to ticket sales and maybe even the hour-long comedy special of his dreams. While singing about the intricacies of modern dating and strumming along on guitar made fans of judges Chrissy Teigen and Kenan Thompson, it didn't even "move the needle" on his career, says Jay, 37. Then, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, he started posting clips of his crowd work — ad-libbing with audiences at old shows — and things took off. One clip blew up, Jay says. Then another. Before that, when he opened a 30-seat backyard gig, half the audience was there to see him.

"I never really wanted to be doing social media. First, you had to post on YouTube, then it was Facebook, then Instagram, then TikTok, and then it was 'You got to be on Clubhouse.' How many things I gotta do, bro? It was a little daunting," Jay says. Now, he has 2.8 million followers and is in the midst of a largely sold-out comedy tour across the U.S.

When dance-heavy app TikTok went mainstream during the pandemic, an unintended side effect was an explosion of the app's comedy landscape. For the first time, starving artists had what they usually fought for tooth and nail: time, money, and energy to create. On a good weekend of stand-up, a comedian might gain 20 new followers from several performances. In comparison, Jay's following grew by 300,000 basically overnight.

Social media has long served as a digital audition ground for mainstream careers — there'd be no Lonely Island or Bo Burnham without YouTube, no Chloe Fineman without Instagram. But with this fresh platform — revolutionary not just for its ease of use, but also its short format and access to massive audiences — a newer question has also emerged: Is a traditional career still what these comics want?

When Kendahl Landreth first watched an episode of *I Love Lucy,* she knew she wanted to be a comedian. After fan-girling over her high school's improv team (she calls them "my 'NSync"), she took classes at the Upright Citizens Brigade, but her character work didn't bring her stand-up success; it was TikTok audiences who fell in love with her comedic Midwestern sketches. Now, with 2.6 million followers, Landreth still does live shows, but her full-time job is creating content — one, she says, she's grateful to have.

"It feels like such a wild thing because I was so used to performing for two people at a bar," says Landreth, 24, who lives in Los Angeles. "I did five improv shows a week, and no one would show up. So to be able to have millions of people watch comedy I make is so bizarre. I'm a very proud content creator."

Even with more comics joining the app every day, TikTok's reception in comedic institutions hasn't gone as smoothly as some might hope. Take, for instance, the meteoric rise of comedian Matt Rife, who spun his strong jaw and viral TikTok crowd-work clips into 18 million followers, a Netflix special, and a sold-out world tour. On TikTok, he's a veritable star, but mainstream comedians like Gary Gulman and Marc Maron have dunked on him (Maron dubbed him "the It boy of shitty comedy"), criticism that often overreaches to denigrate TikTok's entire comedy scene. For comedy-focused creators, it can mean having to break through preconceived notions about the app before they can be accepted in mainstream places.

"I USED TO PERFORM FOR TWO PEOPLE AT A BAR. TO HAVE MILLIONS WATCH IS BIZARRE."

Nimay Ndolo doesn't even call herself a comedian, even though her 2.4 million followers regularly tune in to her TikTok to watch her Gilbert Gottfried-esque, profanity-laden rants about world events, fashion, and sex. But she notes that even though comics who come up through legitimate programs might be more welcomed in the community, the label of creator gives her access to far more revenue streams, including ads, podcasting, and collaborations.

"Are [TikTok comedians] the trash of the public-facing media? I don't know," says Ndolo, 29. "But there is a sort of negativity involved with being an internet person." Stricken by what she calls "quirky Black-girl syndrome," Ndolo is no stranger to the kind of pushback that influencers can get in comedy spaces, especially when stand-up might not be a creator's forte. But, she says, that kind of "resistance" can't stand forever. "I do understand creators wanting to distance themselves from that. But you don't have to shit on it. Personally, if people ask me, I tell them, 'I'm out here,' you know? I'm an internet bitch." (She has noticed that her humor doesn't always translate across platforms, like when a recent TikTok about moving to New York went viral on Twitter: "I called my apartment a hellhole, and people said, 'Oh, no. You called the neighborhood a hellhole!' And I tried my best to explain, but that just didn't work.")

Not all comics want to spin their TikTok fame into an occupation selling their lifestyle. For Stanzi Potenza, who runs a satirical TikTok page about death, politics, and religion, building a career in comedy in New York sounded fun. Being able to pay for her epilepsy medication even after she lost her mom's health insurance sounded better. And with 4 million followers on TikTok, being a content creator gave her the financial freedom to pursue stand-up.

"All of a sudden, I went from living at home with my mom in Boston to moving across the country to Los Angeles and financially having access to all these things that I didn't think was possible," Potenza tells *Rolling Stone.* "A lot of people don't get to become the artists that they want to be because they financially can't do it. TikTok gave that opportunity to the common person."

While TikTok comedians are fighting for legitimacy in the comedy world, older institutions are beginning to actively embrace the evolving landscape. The Second City in Chicago — known for churning out alumni like Chris Farley, Tim Meadows, Stephen Colbert, and Amy Poehler — is building out its curriculum to include more instruction on social media platforms like TikTok. Its artistic director, Jen Ellison, tells *Rolling Stone* that comedy institutions like hers can only stay afloat by "inviting in" the changes apps like TikTok bring to the comedy space.

"[Comedy] is an evolving art form. It responds to the culture that it is in," Ellison says. "So of course it's going to find its way into social media. I think that not evolving the curriculum and not evolving towards digital content, TikTok, and any other app that comes down the line is a mistake. We're still in the process of sort of rebuilding things at Second City."

And even for comedians who don't consider themselves only content creators, TikTok can still serve multiple purposes, as both a day job and a connective lifeline. Taking the advice of her

PHOTO WITHIN ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PRINCE/THE IMAGE BANK/GETTY IMAGES

therapist, Paige Gallagher used her TikTok account, which at that point had just 40 followers, to overcome writer's block during the pandemic and work out new material for her stand-up and sketch-comedy group. It netted her more than 1 million followers, new collaborators, and a major career breakthrough. Gallagher attributes the popularity of her content — and other TikTok comedians like her — to people's desires to open the app and laugh at something everyone has experienced. Not surprisingly, her most popular character is a passive-aggressive mean girl who rules the coop during high school, only to peak before adulthood.

"Relatability, and a little bit of the dark-sided humor, is something that I have always found comforting and funny when I'm seeking out comedy," Gallagher says. "Shows or movies allow people to feel like they can go into this fantasy world, but TikTok is an amazing place for relatable comedy. I think that's the biggest thing that it has."

The connectedness of thousands of people laughing and sharing their own similar experiences has an allure even Gallagher herself isn't immune to. After the recent death of her boyfriend, her account unexpectedly allowed her to connect with others who were grieving.

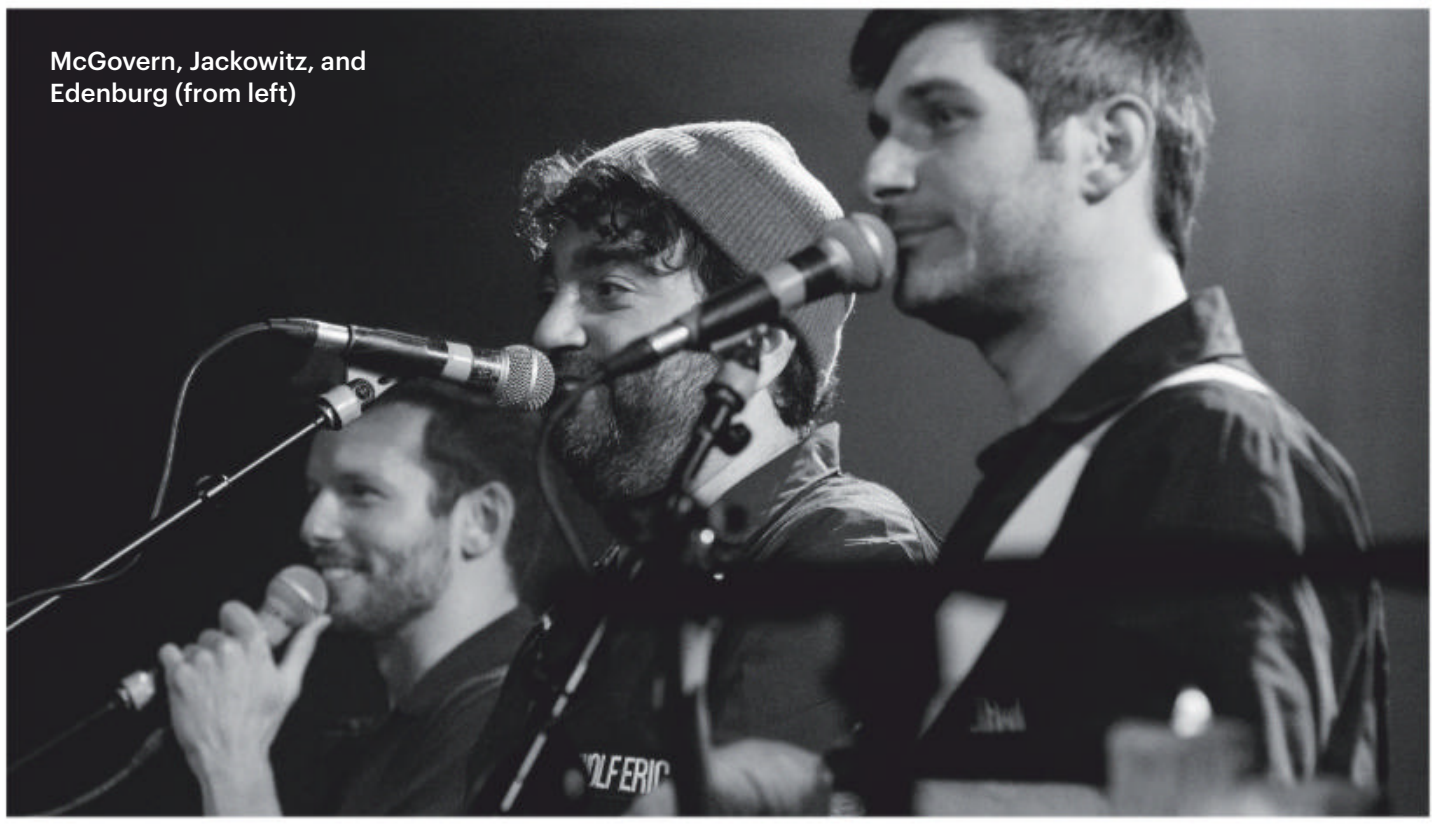
"I posted a 'Get Ready With Me to Go to My Boyfriend's Funeral' video," she says. "And I sort of tried to be real, but also be a little bit funny. It's just the way I cope with things. And the amount of messages that I have gotten since then has been overwhelming. This app [has] created a community that feels real and feels close and genuine. If I didn't have my online community, my grieving process would have looked a lot different."

Jay notes that following his TikTok success, he no longer feels a need to reach for some of his previous goals, like that long-desired comedy special. "I'm never going to do [a comedy special] more than 30 minutes again," he says. "Artists shape art ... but audiences also have a say. And in a world where it costs $100 to go see somebody live, when they can spend an hour at home scrolling through TikTok with their girlfriend cuddling, what do you do? I wanted so bad to have that hour on Netflix or HBO. But seeing the joy and the immediate feedback that I get when I see these crowds, and I'm making a good living, all the things I thought I wanted kind of faded away."

A comedian's path to the stage has always been a struggle, but we're in a brand-new world now, one where social apps like TikTok don't just build new comics from the ground up — they're changing what future careers in comedy can look like. And right now, the most coveted gig in the world might just be on people's personal screens.

"Change is hard for human beings," Ndolo says. "YouTubers were gross until YouTubers were cool. Reality-TV stars were gross until they were cool. This is just the normal cycle of what happens. Now we're in the age of resistance. Ten to 15 years from now, those of us who are still around won't be experiencing this backlash. It's about knowing your audience well and knowing that they came to you for a certain purpose. They came to laugh. I make them laugh."

TONY VOLPE



McGovern, Jackowitz, and Edenburg (from left)

THE TRIPLE THREAT

WOLVES OF GLENDALE

Turning the absurdities of daily life into comedy hits

BY JODI GUGLIELMI

THE FIRST TIME Ethan Edenburg, Eric Jackowitz, and Tom McGovern hung out, they wrote a song. It was March 2022, and they were in Los Angeles, toying around with their instruments, when the conversation turned to what it would be like to have a midlife crisis while visiting Las Vegas.

"It's a Sunday on the Strip. My divorced-ass moved to Vegas," McGovern started singing as he played piano. "My wife left and took the kids. And it's a good thing that she did 'cause they were annoying as shit." Edenburg grabbed his guitar, and Jackowitz got behind the drums. "A skateboarder gave me a vape, and it was great," crooned Edenburg before launching into the chorus. They added another line about strip clubs and imagining Frank Sinatra shooting a busboy, and within a few hours, they had written their first single, "Vapin' in Vegas."

"I think there was this collective feeling of 'Holy shit!' " McGovern says of the group's musical and comedy chemistry. "It was effortless," adds Jackowitz.

A mere nine months later, the three men, now known as the Wolves of Glendale, found themselves onstage in Las Vegas ... performing "Vapin' in Vegas."

They hadn't intended to start a comedy band. Edenburg and Jackowitz, who have known each other since high school, were in a group called the Cooties that had recently split up and were hesitant to dive back into a similar group. McGovern, meanwhile, was still getting settled after moving from New York to L.A. But that creative "spark" they felt during their first session together made them realize they had something rare: "We speak the same comedic language," says McGovern, adding that the trio fits together like a puzzle. Edenburg plays the guitar, while Jackowitz is on drums, and McGovern rounds out the group on keyboard. Even their respective vocal ranges lend nicely to a three-person harmony. "It's cheesy, but it feels like we're creative soulmates."

It doesn't hurt that they got an early blessing from comedy rock gods Kyle Gass and Jack Black of Tenacious D. "I was working with Kyle Gass as a drummer, and we had become super close," recalls Jackowitz. "When I got the call to come jam with Ethan and Tom for the first time, I was like, 'I don't know, guys. Should I be in a comedy band? What do you think, Jack Black and Kyle Gass?' They're like, 'You should absolutely do that.' So, it was weird to get spiritual guidance from them, as it's all happening in this weird kismet-style way."

"This whole band runs on kismet," says Jackowitz. And he might not be wrong — in just the two years since the band formed, they've opened for Tenacious D, David Cross, and Jukebox the Ghost; performed at the Netflix Is a Joke Festival; and are on tour in support of their first studio album, released in January.

Songs like "The Gym," "Loud Ass Car," and "Free Sample" spin wild, unexpected comedic narratives into radio-ready tunes. Their song "Olivia" tells the story of a man who falls in love with his roommate, who just so happens to be a ghost who must eat puppies (yes, puppies) to survive.

"The beauty and the freedom of musical comedy is that we can also have a song like 'Shrimp,' where we're just yelling the word 'shrimp' to a Daft Punk beat for two minutes," says McGovern. "Part of our mission statement is to make the dumb thing sound as good as you possibly can make it." Jackowitz adds: "We want people to think, 'You guys put in so much work for this stupid, idiotic idea.' "

Even the band's name evokes a kind of hardworking-goofball ethos. "We needed something that straddled the line of hard and dumb," says Jackowitz. "A wolf is super badass, and Glendale is a very sleepy suburb of Los Angeles where we happen to work. Plus, the only other huge band to come out of Glendale is System of a Down, the arguably hardest band of all time. So, we knew we were in good company."

But most important, the Wolves of Glendale want everyone who's listening to feel "overwhelmed with joy" — especially when they are performing at a show where the crowd is unfamiliar with their work. "They have no clue what's about to happen," Edenburg says. "And they'll just be sitting there looking at me like, 'What a bozo you are.'

"Then, after the show," he says, "they'll come up and tell us they are now our biggest fan and were laughing the entire time. That, to me, is just the best. That's a testament to what we're doing."

Anitta's Funk Revolution

After a major health scare, the Brazilian star learned to let go and got back to her roots

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LUCAS BORI

Anitta at her home in Brazil in December

Anitta's Funk Revolution

LAST NOVEMBER, just before the Latin Grammys in Seville, Spain, a crowd huddled in front of a club called Sala Cosmos, where the Brazilian superstar Anitta was co-hosting a massive party with Instagram. It got *too* massive: The venue was at full capacity, but that didn't stop people from shoving toward the door, eager to get in. Some of them spilled onto the sidewalk, dancing to the muffled, breakneck Brazilian funk beats echoing from the DJ booth.

Inside, Anitta was the life of the party, ass up and twerking on the dance floor in a highlighter-bright green-and-yellow dress. Stars like hip-hop legend DJ Premier and the Colombian pop band Morat milled about, while Anitta's dancers, nearly all of them Brazilian, backed her up. The DJ spun track after track, each moment a showcase of propulsive, hyper-energetic Brazilian funk, mirroring the parties in Rio where this voltaic blend of hip-hop, African rhythms, and electronic music is played. These days, Brazilian funk (also known as funk carioca or baile funk) is bigger than ever, spawning TikTok dance challenges and full-on choreography. Anitta and her friends threw themselves into the moves – a particularly complex sequence involved push-ups. At one point, Ovy on the Drums, the producer known for making hits with Karol G, came up and told her that to keep up, "*uno tiene que ser atleta*" – "you have to be an athlete."

Late into the night, someone on Anitta's team told her she could go home if she wanted. "I was like, 'I'm already drunk! Why am I going to leave?' " She ended up being one of the last people standing, shutting down the club. "It was like 3 a.m., and they were like, 'OK, they need to close the venue.' I was like, 'Where's the afterparty?' " she says. "I said, 'I'm only leaving when I'm kicked out,' and I got kicked out."

None of this is a big surprise: Anitta has built a brand as a bright, brazen human firework with a supremely dedicated global fan base. At 30, she's a trilingual triple threat, with chart-toppers in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, and her splashy reggaeton and pop hits have helped earn her a Grammy nomination and even a Guinness World Record. "I'm sorry for others, but I think I'm the person who knows *the most* how to do a party," she jokes the next morning, a mischievous smirk on her face.

As she says this, she's sitting in the lobby of her hotel in Seville. You can't tell she's been up all night: She's wearing a white crop top and a crisp black skirt, her red hair in neat, casual waves. Because Spain is hosting the Latin Grammys, the week has been packed with flamenco showcases and Spanish performances, which makes Anitta's event seem even more bold: Only she'd have the guts to throw a gigantic baile-funk bash in the middle of everything.

To her, it was an opportunity to demand attention for Brazil, a country that's frequently and unfairly overlooked in the Latin-music industry because of the differences in language and culture. "This party and things like that help people understand my environment," she says. And it's part of a much bigger plan. Later this year, Anitta will release a Brazilian-funk album she hopes will bring more people to the music that brought her up. "I was born and raised in the communities of Brazil, of Rio, and these are the places that Brazilian funk originally comes from," she explains. "This was always my reality."

The music made her a breakout star in Brazil. Anitta, whose real name is Larissa de Macedo Machado, comes from Honório Gurgel, a working-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro. In 2010, she teamed up with funk-carioca producer Batutinha and signed to a funk label called Furacão. By then, Brazilian funk was already an underground sensation, a result of DJs throwing huge parties that drew from funk and hip-hop in primarily Black favelas during the Seventies and Eighties. Later, in the Nineties, DJs began incorporating freestyle records flown in from Miami, amping the music with offbeat electronic influences.

Brazilian-funk DJ Rodrigo Gorky, who worked on Anitta's upcoming album, says that he used to refer

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY KRISNA. STYLING BY DANIEL UEDA. SWIMSUIT BY AMIR SLAMA. HAIR AND MAKEUP ASSISTANT: FELIPE CARMO. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY GUILHERME HIGASHIZIMA, HUGO MACHADO, AND HENRIQUE SCA. PHOTO ASSISTANCE BY GUTO BROWN. RETOUCHING BY JUNIOR REIS.

Senior music editor JULYSSA LOPEZ *wrote about Ethel Cain in the September issue of* ROLLING STONE.

to the music as "Miami bass on steroids." "Now, it's a complete thing of its own," he says. The genre has shot off into all directions, from tech house to Afrofuturism. Anitta played a special role in its growth, adding a more commercial, pop-focused twist throughout her career. But while she's never abandoned Brazilian sounds, she'd been busy scoring hits in other genres.

Then, last summer, she dropped the EP *Funk Generation: A Favela Story,* along with videos that capture life in Rio. It was the first sign that she was turning back to her roots in a profound way, and there are deeply personal reasons for that: Anitta's been through a lot over the past couple of years, including a cancer scare in 2022. "I was thinking I was going to die," she says. "And I said, 'You know what? I'm going to do an album for myself in case it's the last thing I do – not worrying about what's going to happen after the album, not worrying about if the album is going to be good, if people are going to like it, if it's going to be on the charts.' " Over the next year, Anitta overhauled her management and label teams, moves that positioned her to pursue the album.

She knows that making a Brazilian-funk album – especially when people are used to hearing her work in more mainstream genres – isn't an easy task. Brazilian funk has continued to grow in the pop world, attracting interest from stars like Rauw Alejandro and Cardi B. But it hasn't gotten its due at a global level. Gorky says if anyone can make it an international phenomenon, it's Anitta. "There's no one better than her to represent all this," he says.

"To be the pioneers is very hard because you're doing something nobody has done, so you don't have an example to follow," she explains. "You need to trust your gut, your feelings, and your intuition."

ANITTA STARTED THINKING about the new album when she was in the hospital. She says that in 2022, she had major autoimmune issues while suffering a series of misdiagnoses. (She had surgery for endometriosis that summer, and that December had to cancel a public appearance because she was admitted to a hospital in São Paulo.) At one point, the situation turned into a full-blown cancer scare. She went through tests and treatments for five months, somehow keeping it a secret from millions of fans who follow her every move.

At that time, everything seemed great in her career. Anitta approached the universe like she was game for anything. She was unafraid to talk about sex, plastic surgery ("My favorite one was my nose," she told Andy Cohen), and eventually politics. Fans pressured her to speak out against Brazil's former right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro when he was campaigning in 2018, and though Anitta wasn't very political – she's said she "started to have access to a good education after I got money" – she studied up. Soon, she was one of Bolsonaro's most outspoken critics.

By 2020, a Brazilian newspaper ranked her the third-most-influential political figure in the country, and when elections came in 2022, journalists wrote about how much sway her endorsement had. (Anitta supported current president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.) Meanwhile, her music was bigger than ever: "Envolver," from her 2022 album, *Versions of Me,* made her the first solo Latin artist to reach Number One on Spotify's Global chart. In 2022, she became the first Brazilian artist to win a VMA.

It felt like she was everywhere, constantly working, constantly creating, constantly weighing in. But she was exhausted. "In the beginning, when things were going unbelievably amazing and fast and crazy, it was because I was just having fun," she says. "At some point when things got huge, I started to care, with pressure and numbers and 'Oh, my God, keep my high-level profile!' " Her illness forced her to slow down and think about the never-ending grind her life had become. "It was hard for me to turn off the importance that I used to give to these opinions ... like, 'Oh, am I big enough now? I was big last year. This year I'm not so big. Oh, I'm failing.' "

As she healed physically, she focused on her spiritual and mental well-being. "We can literally die tomorrow," she says. "All of these people saying, 'Oh, she's not hot anymore. Oh, she was hot last year'.... They will completely forget about you. Your life is over, and their lives keep going. And you lived only to maintain yourself in these people's minds and thoughts, even though they don't actually care."

Major career changes followed. In March 2023, she vented on Twitter about wanting out of her contract with Warner Records. "If there was a fine to pay, I would have already auctioned off my organs, no matter how expensive it was, to get out," she tweeted. She blasted the label for using a photo of her with "Envolver" playing in the background on International Women's Day, saying execs originally told her the song would "never break without a feat[ure] cuz I wasn't strong enough for that." "I already accepted the sad unfair fact that I'm the major investor here and asked the label to just do the simple job they were supposed to: promote my music," she wrote.

She says she spoke up because nothing else worked. "Nowadays, I think it was a little immature, but also it was a little desperate. I was desperate," she says. "It is what it is. Nowadays, being more mature, I would maybe do it differently. But maybe if I did differently, I wouldn't be where I am right now."

Warner and Anitta announced they were parting ways in April 2023. ("I really appreciate the way things ended," she says diplomatically.) A few weeks later, she signed with Universal's Republic Records – and then in June, news broke that she'd split from her longtime manager Brandon Silverstein. Anitta brought on Rebecca Leon, known for working with Rosalía, a change that marked a clean break in her career. Anitta has worked to keep it that way. She avoids drama; when people sent her a viral video of Silverstein screaming at someone on Zoom, she didn't comment. "This is not the type of thing that I'm trying to attract to my life," she says. "I was like, 'Guys, I don't want to be part of this conversation, to be honest.' "

Instead, she lasered in on the album, determined to make Brazilian funk right. "When I go to the studio, sometimes I hear people trying to do it, but it's still sounding very gringo," she says, laughing. Gorky remembers that she was hell-bent on getting unexpected sounds. "She's like, 'Nah, that's too commercial. That's way too pop, there's nothing new and exciting about this. Show me more.' And then we would start showing her really weird stuff, and she's like, 'That's what I'm looking for,' " he says.

The final product reinforces the funk with touches of reggaeton and pop, and Anitta says it doesn't fit neatly into any category. "It's kind of like an artistic-alternative album," she explains. "It's not a mainstream of Latin because it's funk. It's not in the mainstream of the English world." She's let go of chart expectations. "When you're just trying to beat this person, beat that chart, beat that number, you don't have a purpose.... And for me, it's way more. I want to open doors for my people."

Anitta spent the beginning of 2024 back in Rio, getting ready for Carnival in February and preparing the album release. When we catch up in January, she admits that things have been more hectic than she wants. "When the work comes back to being crazy, as I am right now in Brazil, then I just feel like, 'Oh, my God, I took a step back,' " she says. But she makes time for yoga and meditation every day, and goes on spiritual retreats every five months or so.

Her favorite thing to do when she's off is to binge movies. "I've seen everything that you can imagine," she says with a laugh. The night before, she went to the movies with her family to see *Mamonas Assassinas: O Filme,* a biopic about a Brazilian rock band that made it big in the early Nineties before a plane crash killed all five members. Plane crashes seem to be a theme; she also watched *Society of the Snow,* recently, followed by the 36-minute making-of doc on YouTube.

A lot still weighs on her. She's deeply concerned about how obsessed with the internet and social media some of her fans seem to be. It breeds the kind of culture of constant comparisons and rankings she's trying to move away from. There's an accessibility to Anitta; she says she tries to do frequent meet-and-greets to talk to fans directly. But she's honest about what so much pressure can do to stars. "I tell them, 'You cannot wish for me to be healthy and at the same time charge me with charts and Number Ones everywhere in the world, in Latin [America], in Brazil. A person can't be healthy and Number One and happy at the same time,' " she says. "That comes back to this point of the internet, that people are not getting used to life being a cycle anymore. They want everything at the same time."

She's already influenced so much of public life in Brazil. Now, she hopes she can impart a few more lessons about letting go and staying present. "Let's just live life appreciating everything, not thinking, 'How am I going to get something from this?' Just doing things because you want to – that's the message I'm going to send with this album."

"I was thinking I was going to die. And I said, 'You know what? I'm going to do an album for myself in case it's the last thing I do, not worrying about if it's going to be on the charts.' "

MIRACLE AT

60

Muddy sediment flowing down the Colorado River

CATARACT CANYON

Damming the Colorado River wiped out a magnificent stretch of rapids for half a century. Now, incredibly, they're bringing themselves back to life

BY CASSIDY RANDALL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEN NECEFER

THE RIVER CHURNS a muddy brown as it carries us through towering vermilion rock walls toward the roar of Gypsum Canyon Rapid. The sound of water breaking over boulders grows louder as we approach, but Mike DeHoff shows no fear at the coming chaos. Rather, as he works the oars of his 18-foot raft, full of a week's worth of camping gear and science equipment, it's clear that he is, instead, thrilled. DeHoff is a local from Moab, Utah, and he's rowed this stretch of the Colorado River, called Cataract Canyon in homage to its long series of vicious rapids, countless times. But he's never rowed Gypsum before.

That's because until recently, this rapid wasn't here. It's only just fully resurfaced this month after being drowned for nearly half a century under the water of the Lake Powell reservoir.

Sixty years ago, this stretch of river was considered as ferocious – and nearly as beautiful – as the Grand Canyon. Then, in 1963, the Glen Canyon Dam was built to store water for human use, which backed up the Colorado River behind it to create Lake Powell. The rising waters snaked upstream, inundating the main river and dozens of its side canyons. Here, at its farthest reaches in Cataract Canyon, the reservoir flooded rapids and then buried the riverbed, including the boulders that made up those rapids, in thick layers of sediment – a mud plug that built up to be so enormous that it flattened out the steep gradient of the riverbed that had made those rapids so fierce.

But miraculously, Cataract is reemerging.

As the Southwest experiences its worst drought in 1,200 years and the mountains at the headwaters of the Colorado receive less snow, Lake Powell has been dropping, and below the dam, the Grand Canyon stretch of the Colorado is in crisis, sparking an increasingly urgent conversation around how to get water to the dry West in an age of climate change. But upstream is a quiet glimmer of hope that could influence how we manage this critically important river – and how we think long-term about water use, conservation, and the practicality of man-made climate solutions.

Here in Cataract, as Lake Powell slowly dries up, historic riverbanks and the river itself are resurfacing. The force of the newly free-flowing current is carving through and washing away the giant dam-deposited sediment plug as the Colorado restores and renaturalizes itself in the wake of receding reservoir waters. The result is an entire ecosystem coming back online right before our eyes, largely on its own, without human management. In the midst of climate-induced change, it's a remarkable illustration that even after humans have walloped it, a landscape can recover.

"The rate of change this year is unlike anything we've ever seen," DeHoff says from his station on the oars as we glide through Cataract Canyon. The river, its banks, and its gradient are transforming so fast that boater informational guides can't keep up with new beaches forming and old ones slumping away, temporary rapids created from mud moving downstream, and historic rapids resurrecting.

Last night, at our camp upriver from the Gypsum Canyon Rapid section, DeHoff and two other Returning Rapids Project founders – his wife, Meg Flynn, a librarian; and professional river guide Pete Lefebvre – compared archival photos from before the dam was constructed with current images from a time-lapse camera they'd set up above the rapid site. They declared that Gypsum, which had been covered in flat water and buried in mud as recently as 2017, now appeared to be nearly fully returned to its former pre-dam power.

Without DeHoff, this environmental miracle may have gone entirely unnoticed on the national stage.

DeHoff is in his early fifties and still sports a boyish smile. He's perpetually in sandals, with wind-tousled hair, his hands cracked from water and rowing, the skin around his eyes pale against his cheeks in a sharp sunglass tan. He looks like a casual rafter – not the head of an increasingly influential organization. But he runs Returning Rapids, a small group of river-rafting enthusiasts who consider Cataract Canyon a second home. They're the only ones coordinating researchers, conservationists, state- and federal-agency representatives, and storytellers to study and spotlight the river's recovery – to hopefully, in turn, influence key decision-makers to prevent drowning it again in the name of seemingly insatiable human consumption.

We're midway through the Returning Rapids annual fall science expedition along with researchers and others studying this changing landscape. As DeHoff expertly positions the big raft, Flynn rises to stand in the bow for a better view of the

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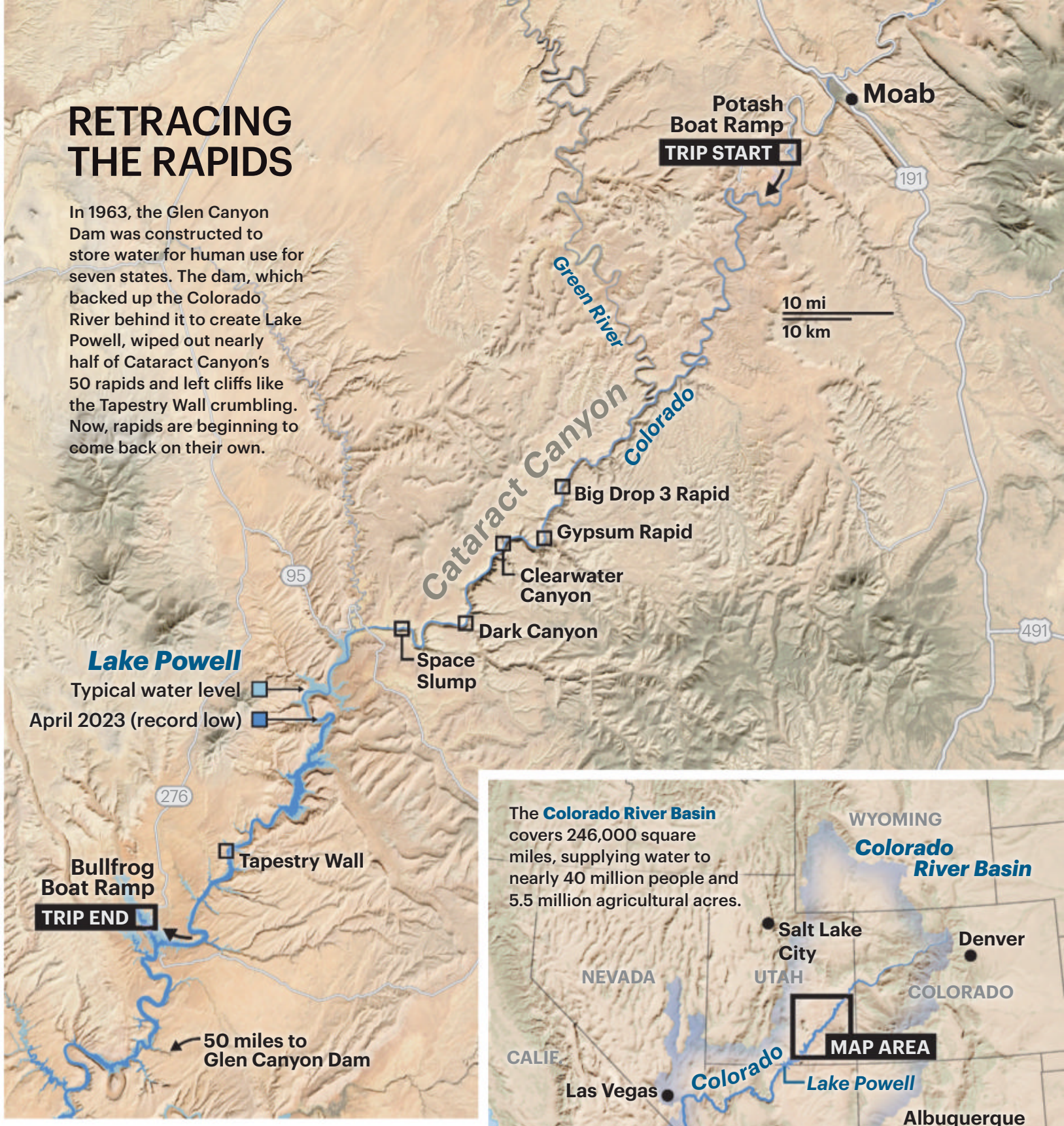
RETRACING THE RAPIDS

In 1963, the Glen Canyon Dam was constructed to store water for human use for seven states. The dam, which backed up the Colorado River behind it to create Lake Powell, wiped out nearly half of Cataract Canyon's 50 rapids and left cliffs like the Tapestry Wall crumbling. Now, rapids are beginning to come back on their own.



SOURCES: UGRC SGID, LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF LAND POLICY, GOOGLE, TERRAMETRICS, LANDSAT/COPERNICUS

MAP BY RILEY D. CHAMPINE

full force of Gypsum. The whole of the strong current appears to explode over a submerged boulder the size of a pickup truck and recirculate like a violent washing-machine cycle. Flynn would like to be on the oars herself for this, but has bestowed the honor of first run to DeHoff. She leans down to kiss him. And then the cold power of nature at work breaks over us.

OUR CULTURE KEEPS diligent track of dates when harm was done to the American people, Flynn says. "But there's less awareness around moments when we perpetrated great harm on our landscape."

She's thinking of March 13, 1963: the day the doors closed on the newly built Glen Canyon Dam to begin backing up the Colorado River. As the reservoir filled, an unknown number of plants and animals were killed, and countless cultural, sacred, historical, and recreational resources were sunk. Once known as the "Graveyard of the Colorado" for the boats of the early exploratory expeditions it dashed to pieces, Cataract's nickname took on a new meaning of environmental grief.

Dams are a common feature on rivers throughout the world, built to store and provide water and hydroelectric power to people living downstream from them; there are 91,000 in the United States alone. The ones on the Colorado River, including Glen Canyon Dam and its reservoir, Lake Powell, are the largest. This mighty river provides water to nearly 40 million people in the West – from Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Denver, and Salt Lake City to myriad small towns in between – and irrigates 5.5 million acres of agricultural lands, including the Coachella and Imperial valleys, which grow and raise food eaten all over the country.

To understand the dam requires knowing the impossible demand on the Colorado River. Back in 1922, officials from the seven states the river runs through met to decide how to divide up and use its water, and codified the resulting agreement in the Colorado River Compact. The compact, though, had a serious complication built into it from the start: It allocated around 16 million acre-feet of water among the states for use even though only 12 to 13 million actually flow through the basin. (For perspective, one acre-foot is equal to 326,000 gallons, enough to flood a football field one foot deep.)

"It was a conspiracy of plenty," explains Michael Fiebig, Southwest River Protection director for American Rivers. Fiebig was one of Returning Rapids' first conservation allies, and, an experienced rower, he's guiding one of the rafts on this research trip. "The theory was that you couldn't have gotten the seven states to sign a compact if it was going to short some of them."

But the Colorado's flow was inconsistent, fiercely fickle between torrential floods and trickles. Thus Glen Canyon Dam was built to create Lake Powell as a storage shed, a sort of "bank account" to make withdrawals from to constantly deliver promised water – and the decades of over-allocation built into the compact, on top of drought, means we've been pulling water from the Colorado faster than the reservoirs can refill. "And now," Fiebig says, "in a changing climate where we're supposed to get up to 50 percent less water by 2100, you can see why there's a problem."

New rules for how the river's water is managed and shared are being developed to address that problem for the next quarter century. "What we do on the Colorado is being watched worldwide," Fiebig says. "It's one of the most managed rivers in the world, that supports a massive economy. And it's a bellwether for how highly managed, highly climate-susceptible rivers are going to deal with over-allocation and persistent drought."

The rulemaking is a ridiculously complicated process with a dizzying array of stakeholders. And, like the 1922 negotiations, it's "hugely political," says Amy Haas, executive director of the Colorado River Authority of Utah, which works on that state's water interests on the Colorado. It's not as simple as pitting river restoration against irrigating fields and providing drinking water. Rather, it's about all seven states accepting the fact that they have to change the way they do things by making significant adjustments due to the overall decreasing water supply. "Everyone's going to have to share in the pain," Haas says.

Across the West, the implementation of large- and small-scale solutions could greatly reduce the demand on the Colorado, from replacing lawns with native plants to updating antiquated water-rights laws to transforming the industrial agriculture that consumes the bulk of the river's water. But changing social attitudes, policies, and entire industries when it comes to something as vital as water is exceedingly difficult and complicated. Which is why, Fiebig says, some stakeholders still seem focused on continuing to plumb the water for all it's worth – a repeat of the 1922 politics that contributed to landing us in a water crisis in the first place. "But for us in the conservation world and our partners in the tribal world," he says, "the big question is: Is there room for the river itself?"

This era of climate change has largely been one of realizing irreparable loss of species, habitats, and resources, and what many would call frustratingly slow responses where politics trump environmental realities. Rarely have we seen such a clear example of nature healing itself from our destruction of it – and been presented a second chance, on such a large scale, to make a different decision about our collective future.

DeHoff sits next to me on a beach with the morning just blushing the cliffs, drinking coffee. "What's special about where we are now," he says, "is that this is the last wild stretch of the Colorado before we kill it."

He takes a moment to collect himself; the fact that the Colorado is so used up that it no longer touches the sea overwhelms him. He isn't after some radical goal like dismantling the dam tomorrow. But he thinks decision-makers need to acknowledge that we're using more water from this basin than actually exists, more than we even need. "I just call bullshit. We're enslaving environmental forces. We're making the Colorado River participate in *The Giving Tree,*" he says, referenc-

A guide takes on the rapids.

"THE RATE OF CHANGE THIS YEAR IS UNLIKE ANYTHING WE'VE EVER SEEN," SAYS RETURNING RAPIDS' CO-FOUNDER MIKE DEHOFF.

ing the story of a boy who takes all the resources from a tree and then, as an old man, sits down on the only part remaining: a dead stump.

THE FIRST TIME DeHoff saw this canyon was in the early 1990s. He was 21 and a new river guide. Camped above the start of the famously fearsome rapids, he woke before dawn in a fit of anxious energy, packed his boat by moonlight, then fell asleep under a pile of life jackets to keep warm. No one could find him in the morning until a guest sat on the pile. Those were the days when the rapids, reduced to just 14 churning miles from their historic 41, ended below a thunderous falls called Big Drop 3.

Now, DeHoff is 52. He switched to welding after river guiding, but never stopped running rivers. He sold his welding business just a few days before this trip to run Returning Rapids full time, even though there are no funds to pay himself with yet.

He would sooner sink his own raft than brag, so I hear about his river expertise elsewhere. Lefebvre says DeHoff has run Cataract's rapids at terrifyingly high river flows that most people won't touch. Flynn says the two of them once navigated a stretch of this river by lightning strike to escape a flash flood. DeHoff himself stopped counting his trips down Cataract at one hundred, a long time ago. So when things started to change, he noticed.

In 2012, Lake Powell levels started receding noticeably, and Cataract Canyon, at the far edges of the reservoir, was the first to begin resurfacing from under the ebbing lake waters. Moving water then uncovered the built-up sediment.

In 2013, DeHoff began keeping a spreadsheet recording shifts as the reservoir dropped – mostly observations on shoreline change and where currents had begun flowing again – to share with the national-park rangers he ran into on his trips down Cataract. In 2014, Lefebvre, also a Moab local, started coming by DeHoff's welding shop to compare notes on evidence of rapids beginning to return below Big Drop 3. Flynn, then finishing her master's degree in library science, searched obscure archives for old pre-dam photos of the river to cross-reference which rapids the returning ones might be, and to what extent they were resurfacing. Soon, Chris Benson, a Moab geologist turned pilot, also joined to offer aerial reports of water and riverbank changes. DeHoff likens this inception of Returning Rapids to a bad joke: "A librarian, a river guide, a pilot, and a welder walk into a bar and ask, 'When's the next rapid coming back?' "

Today, the reservoir has receded so much that Cataract's side canyon of Clearwater has resurfaced as a calm oasis of native willow and primrose; Dark Canyon has returned to its pre-dam state as a gentle creek with a reputation for swinging like a merry psychopath to catastrophic flash floods. In all, 10 historic rapids have reemerged.

Since Returning Rapids ran its first science trip down Cataract Canyon in 2019, with the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and university scientists who'd been connected to the project by various people in the river community, this place has repeatedly blown researchers' minds with a scene that, as recently as 10 years ago, few people thought was possible, given the scale of Glen Canyon Dam's impact. But thanks to those trips, resurfacing cultural and archaeological resources have been found and documented, including ancient rock art and inscriptions from early boating expeditions. The USGS has installed gauges where none have existed for decades to measure the flowing river. Geologists and hydrologists have conducted groundbreaking studies of how sediment moves in and affects a drought-impacted environment, and of methane seeps and volcanoes (organic matter breaking down in exposed reservoir sediment releases methane and other gases in the air that impact the carbon cycle). Many of these are the only studies of their kind: cutting-edge science that will be the foundation of research as reservoirs are drawn down in drought-affected regions around the world.

DeHoff, Flynn, and Lefebvre (from left) on the rapids trip

"I cannot emphasize how amazing, and important, it is that Returning Rapids is convening the science community around this, and bringing in agencies and tribal communities and people from different backgrounds," says Brenda Bowen, a geoscientist with the University of Utah who's been coming on Returning Rapids trips since 2019. "It's already changed the trajectory of the outcomes of this landscape because they've brought more attention to it, and they're helping people organize around it."

And yet many river rafters, conservationists, and scientists see these lower reaches of Cataract Canyon, for all of their scientific, cultural, and recreational significance, as falling through the cracks of government-agency management, where no precedent seems to exist for who takes responsibility for a reservoir turned returning river. Eric Balken, executive director of the Glen Canyon Institute, which focuses on restoring the Glen and Grand canyons, says that "many land and water managers treat the emerging landscape as an area that will one day be under water again, even though the data suggests the opposite. This management approach of 'That's just where the reservoir used to be, it's not important' is so misguided. As the reservoir comes down, what's emerging has similar qualities to all the popular and cherished parks and monuments in this area, like Bears Ears, Grand Staircase Escalante, and Grand Canyon."

A recent environmental impact report by the Bureau of Reclamation, which is in charge of dams, implied erroneously that mostly invasive species were returning as Lake Powell's water level dropped. But Returning Rapids has brought scientists down Cataract, who find native plants returning, birds returning as shorelines emerge, beavers returning as willows and cottonwoods sprout on those shorelines. In response to a request for comment, the Bureau of Reclamation directed me back to the report with the erroneous implications.

Canyonlands National Park, which manages the river, and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area (NRA), which manages the reservoir, tell me in a joint statement that the agencies are aware of the landscape emerging in Cataract; staff see it on routine river patrols and receive Returning Rapids' trip reports. Both agencies "maintain active programs for resource monitoring throughout the park, including monitoring of archaeological sites, monitoring for invasive vegetation species, and monitoring of various plants and wildlife species. As the lake level drops, areas of shoreline are incorporated into the park's existing science-based monitoring and research programs to understand and respond to the changing lake environment."

Returning Rapids regularly shares its observations and data collected from scientists on its trips with these and other agency managers, and has invited and brought Canyonlands officials on its science expeditions. DeHoff has also invited officials from the NRA, but none have yet accepted. Although Returning Rapids recently attained a new degree of credibility in becoming a project under the Glen Canyon Institute, often when DeHoff shares real-time data of changing conditions with agency decision-makers, he says, he's usually greeted with some iteration of "Wait, who are you guys?"

The Returning Rapids crew – it's hard to call them "staff" when they volunteer their time and even all of their own river equipment to run research trips – aren't scientists, conservation experts, government employees, or lobbyists. They're average people who care deeply about a particular place and have the specialized river skills to bring scientists and policy-makers to see it. But DeHoff isn't afraid to push for meetings with high-level government staff, nor to ask agency bigwigs what their plan is for managing all of the backed-up mud on the emerging river – the response to which, he says, in the early years of sharing his observations, was generally "What mud?"

THE MUD FIRST becomes apparent as we start running the resurrected rapids. Lefebvre points it out as we float by masses of the stuff spiked from the river like dirt icebergs, creating roiling hydraulics in the current. Miniature mountain ranges of mud line the shore. Soon it towers two stories high on

Top: Decades ago, there was a hot spring along Cataract Canyon — now it's reemerged to create a lake. Middle: Thanks to the changing waters, Returning Rapids has also identified cultural markings that have reappeared. Bottom: The moving sediment is so large it can be viewed from space.

either side of the river: remnants of the great sediment plug, courtesy of Glen Canyon Dam, that the Colorado is tunneling through to restore itself.

Bowen explains that a natural river carries sediment downstream, depositing it here and there to create wetlands for birds and insects, habitat for fish, soil for native plants and trees, sand for beaches. The Colorado is milkshake-thick with it. But as the river slows down coming into Lake Powell, it drops its sediment, and then the dam stops that sediment from moving downstream, starving ecosystems from the Grand Canyon to the Mexican delta of their wetlands, sand, and soil. It's estimated that Lake Powell has lost 6.8 percent of its storage capacity due to sediment buildup. Bowen calls it a reminder that we didn't just flood Glen and Cataract and all of their natural and cultural resources: "We buried them, too, and that's another level of heartbreak."

After we run Gypsum rapid, DeHoff attaches a motor to the raft to cover miles of flat river, where the historic rapids are still buried under 40 feet of sediment. We're headed to the particular mud feature that's the main attraction of this science expedition. It's called a slump, where sediment layers collapse onto emerging riverbank or into the river. And this one is spectacular: so big that it could be seen on satellite imagery, the moment an enormous section of sediment collapsed last July, dumping its terraces to create new waves and shoving the biggest river in the West into a tight 20-foot channel. Returning Rapids named it the Space Slump. It's the largest single movement of sediment that the group has observed yet.

Suddenly, an acrid odor of sulfur burns our noses. Then we round the river bend and see it: A human-caused landmass bigger than a Super Walmart has collapsed into the river. Dried sediment blows off it like moon dust. Great islands of mud that broke from the slump upon impact jut from the channel. DeHoff ties up to a solid piece of shore rock across from the slump. Bowen gives a safety talk about walking on the formation. Dried sediment can collapse without warning, creating avalanches of earth that can easily bury a person. Wet sediment is so unconsolidated that unsuspecting people have sunk to their chests in it. As it dries, it creates dangerous crevasses that can also swallow a person.

Bowen had told me her fieldwork often consists of staring closely at a single sediment wall for several hours. It's immediately clear this is not what will happen here, that to measure the Space Slump presents an overwhelming, perhaps impossible, task. The slump wall is moated in a fast current with dangerous eddies that can suck down the side of a boat, there's a gargantuan amount of mass to be surveyed, and where the hell is the sulfur smell coming from? Everyone looks to DeHoff, who begins to direct operations like a symphony conductor.

What ensues is a high-adrenaline display of adventure science, requiring significant [*Cont. on 80*]

Inside the ring, injuries are common. “If no one dies, it’s not a corraleja,” fans say.

Inside Colombia's bullfighting, one of the world's deadliest games – a bloody free-for-all where only the humans die

BY TOBY MUSE

'It's Like I'm Dancing With Death'

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLOS PARRA RIOS

In the coliseum, the bull stares down hundreds of men. He’s a half-ton killer, black, head white like a skull, horns curled. Bred for the fight.

There’s violence in his DNA. The bull scans the crowd in the ring, alert to any challenge. The crowd watches for the animal’s slightest of movements. When the hundreds of men flee, they move in tandem, like a school of fish dodging a shark. The blazing tropical sun beats down on us all.

From the crowd steps a man. Catalino Bravo wears the face of a clown, white paint over his black skin, a nose daubed red. Something’s crazed in his eyes. An entirely sane man would not yell at an enraged 600-pound bull that stands 30 feet in front of him.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!”

The 25,000 or so spectators cheer Catalino. In the stands, one of the band’s drummers is lost in his solo. The drums beat faster and faster.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!”

The bull settles his gaze on Catalino and stomps the ground, shooting dust into the air. Catalino takes two steps forward, two steps back, revving his body. Rapt, the audience watches. The drums pound in a frenzy, and Catalino again shouts “Hey! Hey! Hey!”

The bull charges. The audience cheers, the audience screams. Quickly crossing himself, Catalino sprints – straight at those horns. Now everything happens faster than the brain can process. Why is this man running at the charging bull? How can he survive? What the fuck is going on?

The audience is on its feet, hollering. The drum solo keeps going, faster, madder. The man and the bull charge each other, erasing meters in a second.

At the last moment, when it seems inevitable that Catalino will be gored, everyone holds their breath. Inches from those murderous horns, Catalino launches himself into the air, soaring over the bull. The bull steamrolls forward, and Catalino lands in the dirt in a roll and jumps to his feet.

The crowd hollers, shaking the wooden pillars, threatening to bring down the entire coliseum. The “jump of death,” a trick that has cost men their lives, had been perfectly executed – this time. A second too early or too late, the bull could hook Catalino, ripping him open. Now, he runs around the ring, celebrating like a champion. From the stands, adoring spectators throw money down to him.

“This sport is for psychos,” Catalino says afterward, his eyes still glowing from the adrenaline.

These are the *corralejas,* bullfighting Colombian-style. The corralejas mix San Fermín’s Running of the Bulls, where the brave, the drunk, and the dumb outrun marauding bulls, and Spain’s traditional bullfighting. But with important differences. Here the bulls don’t die. Only the men.

For more than a century along Colombia’s Caribbean coast, hundreds of men – many loaded on rum and beer – have crammed into rickety wooden coliseums to test their bravery with the bulls. I’ve spent more than a decade watching the corralejas, drinking the rum, seeing the bulls, learning the rules and eccentricities. Over an afternoon, 36 bulls are released, one at a time, to tear through the crowds of men. After five minutes or so, the bull is lassoed and led out of the ring, and the next animal barges out of the metal doors. Most of the men are there as voluntary cannon fodder for the spectacle. Their mission: Stay off the bulls’ horns. The slow, the unlucky? The bull gets them. But a core of some 50 men are professional bullfighters like Catalino, who earn their living in front of the bull. The “Suicide Men,” they’re called. Injuries are daily. Deaths are common. Supporters and critics alike compare it to the gladiator games of ancient Rome.

In the stands above, tens of thousands watch the show, dancing to live orchestras. Old women, shots of rum in their hands, laughingly repeat the event’s motto: “If no one dies, it’s not a corraleja.”

It’s a six-day dark carnival of music, rum, blood, and madness. One of the world’s deadliest sports – and its time might soon be up.

There is music and drinking at every corraleja. “This is our tradition,” says one attendee.

TRADITIONAL BULLFIGHTING WAS brought over to Colombia by the Spanish colonizers, an Old World pastime for the New. In Spain and parts of Latin America, they had corraleja-style events in small towns in eras past. Closing off the town plaza, men performed daredevil tricks with bulls provided by local wealthy cattlemen. But over time, these were outlawed or abandoned as too dangerous. Except here on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. The history is murky, but the few historians of the corralejas believe they started in the first half of the 19th century in the flatlands of the provinces of Sucre and Córdoba, where the business is cattle. These are beautiful, baked landscapes topped with thick tropical clouds that cut like white mountain ranges against the pale-blue sky. The people along the Caribbean coast are known as Costeños. In the faces you see traces of Africa, Europe, and the Indigenous of the Americas. They are proud of their region, heritage, and local eccentricities. Just half an hour down the highway from this corraleja, the town of San Antero holds its annual donkey beauty contest.

The World Bank confirms what your eyes see in this country of small oases of wealth surrounded by widespread need, calling Colombia “one of the most

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The corraleja stadium may soon be a thing of the past.

unequal countries in the world." Nearly 40 percent of the country lives in poverty, close to 14 percent in what is classified as extreme. These farmlands of the coast are concentrated in the hands of a small number of families, massive cattle ranches that stretch over the horizon. It feels close to feudal. And maybe that is part of this story: a legion of young men who know their chances of rising high are small, and so see in the ring a path. In the corralejas, the poor man can become someone, but the price is blood.

Spectators adore the event. They use words like "excitement," "party," but mostly "tradition."

"I love the action … the adrenaline of the bulls," says Cristina Osorio, standing outside of the ring. "There aren't any rules. Anything goes for the party. It's six days – enjoy yourself to the max." And then she says something you'll hear at every corraleja. "The corralejas – you carry this in your blood."

Luis Baldovino, a YouTuber who films corralejas for his El Show de Frijolito TV channel, comes whenever he can. "It's a passion – it's something that you can't put into words. The men express themselves in the ring fucking around with the bull." He laughs as if aware that what he says is both absurd and a stone-cold fact.

This affection is not shared by all those in Colombia. Gustavo Petro, the country's first left-wing president, has promised to end the corralejas.

"I've asked all the mayors of the country to stop organizing shows of death," he tweeted. "Colombia is a country of beauty not savagery."

The president spoke for millions of Colombians who loathe the corralejas, calling it a blood sport, an abuse of animal and man. When videos of bullfighters dying go online, the comments can be split between commiserations and those cheering on the bull.

"This sport is for psychos," Catalino says. "Death is always at your side, even if you can't see her."

"My cause is the rights of animals," Sen. Andrea Padilla says in her crisp Bogotá accent. "Wherever they are victims of violence, me, and I know thousands of other Colombians, are ready to speak up."

A lifelong dedication to animal rights earned her a seat in Colombia's senate. She still volunteers at animal-rescue foundations and sterilization programs for stray cats and dogs, and she wants the corralejas shut down – forever.

"These are shows of violence against animals, whose aim is to make the animal suffer, to torture them," Padilla says, and she has introduced legislation that would ban the corralejas, as well as traditional bullfighting and cockfighting. "These are violent spectacles that are good for no one, and keep these towns submerged in a culture of bread and circus, and so they don't get important necessities like health, education, and safety."

The bill advanced through the legislature, posing the biggest legal challenge to the corralejas, threatening to outlaw them (corralejas are only allowed in those parts with a tradition of holding such events).

And as it progressed, it was sunk in committee before it could reach a vote.

Padilla wants to put forward more legislation, but also intends to put the question to the Colombian people. "We're moving forward with the referendum, where the citizens can decide if these cruel spectacles can keep existing in Colombia," Padilla says. Sooner, not later, the corralejas will be banned, she adds.

The view among many of the locals, those who enjoy the corralejas: It's not for everyone, but it's important to us. "I'm born into this. It's our thing. If you ask someone from the rest of the country, like Bogotá or Medellín, they may not like it. But this is our thing, it's innate in us," says Samuel Negrete, a doctor who for years has tended the drunk, heat-afflicted, and wounded of the corralejas.

THE TINY TOWN of Cotorra holds the "mother of the corralejas," one of the largest and longest-running. A man steps into the ring, tall and skinny, kneels quickly, touches the dirt, and crosses himself. A legend of the sport, fans wave to him. Outside the ring, he is

Inside the medical tent, nurses tended to Omar Lopez after a bull ripped open his leg.

Sinibaldo España Saltarin. As he waits for the bull, he is Saltarin, the bullfighter.

“When I’m in the ring, I’m someone else. The world changes. It’s all different. I don’t know how to explain it. And when I step out of the ring, it changes back,” he says. Other bullfighters say the same: that the ring is another plane of existence, that life is sped up, concentrated, with all the dull bits removed.

Today, Saltarin wears a black T-shirt, jeans, and his trademark sunglasses. He is easygoing, with a ready smile. He carries a large cape, orange on one side, purple on the other, and a long scar across his neck, a reminder of when a bull was faster. I ask him what happened. “Not much. Only, the bull nearly ripped my veins out,” he says with a shrug and a laugh.

Now, he joins 10 other bullfighters in front of the big metal door to wait for the bulls as thousands look on. To step in front of the animal, these men must overcome primal survival instincts hardwired into our brains. “You can’t be scared, because then you’ll fail,” Saltarin says. “Fear makes you hesitate, it stops you from acting decisively. If you’re not going to act decisively, don’t do it.”

Saltarin is a *capotero,* a man who uses a cape and theatricality to excite the crowd. The metallic door clangs open and the bull charges. He draws the bull in, waving his cape firmly, graceful and quick. The bull races forward. At the last moment, he steps to the side and the bull runs through the cloak, horns passing inches from Saltarin’s chest. The crowd cheers as he works the bull in a flurry of twists and turns, bringing the bull in, once, twice, three times.

“When you’re working the cape, it’s a dance, like I’m dancing with death,” he tells me. “Death is a friend, loyal. She’s always at your side, even if you can’t see her.”

Saltarin shouts at the bull and flicks the cape again to lure it in, and again the bull charges him. Again, at the last moment he steps out of the way. The audience cheers.

Saltarin grew up poor on farms in the countryside. A desire for some quick cash and to impress his friends and neighbors – and a taste for danger – led him to the corralejas.

“I don’t have adrenaline, adrenaline lives in me,” he cackles. “It drives you to do crazy things, all for the action. This addiction to adrenaline is dangerous.”

“We’re gladiators,” says one bullfighter. “This is tradition, the human being against the beast.”

In the ring, the complexities of modern life – bills, taxes, relationship dramas – all fade away. Existence, he says, becomes as simple as “Will I triumph, or will I fail? Am I going to live or die?”

The bullfighters enjoy the old carnival life, traveling from town to town to risk their lives in these six-day spectacles. Beds are hammocks slung under the coliseum’s stands, and breakfasts are cold beers. They go by names like “the Mask” (whose face has been disfigured repeatedly by bulls), “the Death” (once so savagely gored the audience was sure he had left this world for the next), “the Ball,” “Mandarina.” One goes by the name of “Dickface” (*Carechimba*), and I’ve never had the courage to ask him why. “Crazy Horse” is known for his cowboy hat and his little dances in the ring. In a 2022 corraleja, a bull was too quick, too strong, and brutally wounded him. Doctors struggled to save his life, and to do so, sawed off his left leg. Now, Crazy Horse returns to the corralejas to drink rum with his old bullfighting buddies with his shiny metal leg. A stream of fans take selfies with him, and he accommodates each request with a smile.

This life is carved into the bodies of the bullfighters – crisscrossing scars. “Fifty-six gorings I’ve had,” says the Death, ugly scars crossing his body like a map. His life in the ring has left him only a few teeth.

Alvaro Nova is a rarity, one of those who survived long enough to retire. From the cosmopolitan Cartagena, he followed a bullfighting uncle into the ring more than 50 years ago, practicing with young bulls when he was eight years old. His choice was the cape, waving it back and forth in front of the violent bull.

“It’s a sport because you must prepare yourself physically,” he says. “But more than that, it’s an art, like a song, like music, like a painting. They call it the ‘ballet of death.’ ” Nova retired because of the lack of steady money. “Here, we earn whatever pesos we can get – playing with our lives. This can be a tragedy,” he says, and chuckles. “I love the corralejas.”

This sport is too off the grid and chaotic to keep statistics, but deaths are common. I’m told that nine bullfighters were killed in the past few years. Unsurpisingly, the Suicide Men embrace the role of death in their lives. “We’re gladiators,” says Saltarin. “The

Bullfighter “Crazy Horse” returns to visit friends. He lost his leg due to a corraleja.

fight of a man against animals, the way the slaves earned their freedom. This tradition starts there. The human being against the beast."

THE CORRALEJAS ARE as much a party as a sporting event, and spectators and bullfighters spend the day drinking. Many of the bullfighters live in a haze of booze, starting in the morning. A few shots of rum before an afternoon of the bulls can steel nerves. In the ring, they pass bottles back and forth for quick swigs.

"No one sober would fight the bulls. You've got to be at least tipsy so you're less afraid of the bull," says the Ball, a personable bullfighter and one of the few whose face is not drawn in scars. "It's always better to be a little drunk with some rum in you."

Once the afternoon of bulls is over, the night comes with music and dancing, and the drinks keep flowing to now celebrate another day survived. Much of the money earned during the day is spent at the bars made of wooden planks that surround the arena. Bullfighters can be opaque about how much they earn. Rarely have I received a straight answer (and maybe it's none of my business). Some have told me that the wages are constantly going down, that just more than a decade ago they could earn at least 3 million pesos (about double the monthly minimum wage) for six days of work, and more in tips.

At 3 p.m., a huge firework explodes in the middle of the ring, announcing that the first bull is about to be released. The ring becomes a swirling mass of activity. Most of the hundreds of men below are the so-called ducks; amateurs, there to be close to the action, to test their bravery. They hang from fences, they run in front of the bull.

Everything moves fast. A bull can sprint 35 mph. Even if you're on the other side of the ring, you're never more than three or four seconds away from an irate bull bearing down on you like doom itself.

In the crowds, men sell to the thirsty, carrying buckets filled with ice and beer. And when the bull comes, they run for their lives like everyone else, careful not to drop a single can. Other men carry

The crowd hangs on to the grandstand — shaking the arena — provoking the bulls.

huge publicity banners for local businesses or politicians around the ring.

Men dress as devils and pose for photos, a clown walks around shouting jokes, a man enters the ring on his motorbike, which has a set of horns at the front, and drives through the crowd. And that’s the point of a corraleja: It’s this massive spectacle and everyone has their role, be it the spectator who funds it, the ducks who provide the thrills, or anyone else who wants to put on a show.

A dozen mounted horsemen huddle together. The horsemen are a key part of Spanish bullfighting, to tire the bull ahead of its final death at the hands of the matador. Here, the riders chase the bull around the ring. Another import from Spanish bullfighting are the *banderillas,* sticks wrapped in shredded paper and topped with harpoon-shaped blades. Some bullfighters run in front of the bulls to stick these in the beast’s flanks, leaving bloody but shallow flesh wounds. But that the bull bleeds at all is reason enough for animal-rights advocates to call it “torture” and demand an end to the corralejas.

The wealthy cattlemen are the center of gravity here. It’s a group of 20 or so who share bottles of imported whiskey. There’s a constant back and forth between the cattlemen and the bullfighters below as they negotiate money for each trick. A young man runs up and offers to do the “seat of death,” a dangerous trick where the man must sit in front of a running bull and lie down at the last moment, and hope the bull somehow runs over him or doesn’t stop to gore him. I’ve seen men mauled to death attempting this trick. The young man demands $60. The cattleman won’t pay more than $20. No deal.

From the stands, spectators toss dozens of packs of candy down onto the bulls, daring the men below to edge closer to the beast. One man throws a wad of cash down into the ring, creating a scrum of men scrambling in the cloud of bills. And if there’s ever a slowdown in the pace of the afternoon, a spectator will shoot a firework into the crowd.

The fans salute a good bull’s performance, his taste for the fight. The best bulls become legends. “Seven Boxes” earned his name after sending seven men to their coffins.

The sport’s death toll makes the corralejas a world of ghosts. And sometimes they visit. Widows pass through the stands carrying large photos of their dead bullfighting husbands, their hands out in the hopes of a little help. Today, old man Moises Machado is led by a young man. Words on a large white collection box tell Machado’s story, of how he once fought the bulls, but a goring left him voiceless and crippled.

Back in the ring, a bull shoots out of the metal door like a cannonball, and the audience cheers. He’s tan, a large white line running down the center of his face. The bull tears through the crowd as men run, narrowing in on one fleeing man. Screams rise through the crowd. A moment before the inevitable, the man puts out his hand as if that might stop the beast. The bull smashes into the man’s waist with such force it flips him in the air, his feet flying over his head. The blow sends him 20 feet across the ring, knocking a shoe off. He lands face first in the dirt, crumpled and motionless.

All of this occurs in seven seconds.

The bull trots to the other side of the ring while men pick up the young man and carry him out.

In the medical tent next to the coliseum, the doctors and nurses hear the screams as the young man is flipped by the bull. That’s their sign that a man has become a patient and is on his way. “Medical tent” is a grand term for four metal poles with a tarpaulin roof. Samuel Negrete, a doctor at the local hospital, today is running the medical team of another doctor and five nurses. Two ambulances are ready to go, their back doors open, their engines running.

The man is delivered motionless and quickly put on one of the medical tables. There’s a question as to whether he’s dead or not. Negrete checks his signs – he’s alive and lucky, the bull’s horn hasn’t pierced him. As Negrete looks the man over, crowds of people encircle the tent, craning to see the day’s injured.

After five minutes, the man regains consciousness, but is groggy and unsure where he is. A neck brace is fitted, and he’s driven to the local hospital.

“A normal day is five, six, seven injured. They’re injured in their throats, abdomen, their heads,” says Negrete during a brief break between patients. A common injury is men being gored in their anuses.

The capoteros use a cape and theatricality in the ring to excite the crowd.

"It happens a lot. The man is running away from the bull and the bull reaches him, and the part most affected is the anus. There are tears and punctures."

The tent provides triage – there's a limit to what they can do with bandages and a couple of medical beds. "Sometimes they come in with total cardiac arrest and die right away.

If there is serious trauma to the thorax region, it's sometimes impossible to save them in a setup as basic as this one.... There are afternoons when there are two or three deaths."

"When I'm in the ring, I'm someone else. The world changes. I don't know how to explain it."

Negrete is young and personable. He enjoys the corralejas even as he's conflicted over the price of the spectacle. "Ninety percent who arrive here are not the bullfighters, but the ducks, those who went looking for death," he says. "It's frustrating – because you ask yourself, 'Why did they risk their life?' "

We're interrupted by another collective scream from the ring – another patient is on his way.

Omar Lopez is carried in by his friends. He's a young bullfighter in his twenties, his left trouser leg drenched in blood. He grimaces, keeping his eyes off the wound. His sister, Yuli, follows him.

"Look at you! What's our mother going to say?"

Sheepish, Lopez lies on the medical cot as Negrete cuts off the trouser leg. The bull's horn has ripped open his left knee. Lopez clenches his teeth and looks away. Blood pours out of his leg.

"The bull got him. It went for him three times, and he didn't understand it was trying to kill him," says the sister, watching Negrete tend to her brother's leg. Her face veers between anger and concern. "It's not the first time a bull almost killed him. My mother will die if she hears."

Negrete and the nurses clean the wound, bandage the gash. For a nasty cut, Lopez is in good spirits, now laughing and winking with the nurses. He's an eight-year veteran of the corralejas.

"I'll be back in the ring as soon as I can," he says. "Maybe tomorrow?" He hobbles back to the stands to show off his wound and ask for tips.

Over the afternoons, the tent also tends to people passed out from the heat. The sun hits hard here, with temperatures that hover around 100 degrees and people crammed into the stands. One day, three women are brought in, passed out from the heat.

"We live this every day in the time of the bulls," says Negrete.

Negrete and the nurses sit for a break. And then come the screams, and up they jump, ready for the next patient. The flow of patients reminds me of the field hospital I saw outside Mosul as the Iraqi army battled ISIS.

Luis Sandoval, 62, is carried in by four men, their arms covered by his blood. His face is pale, his shirt and jeans both drip red with blood. On the back of his thigh is a hole that pumps dark blood onto the cot. Negrete applies pressure to the wound and finally manages to maintain a bandage over the wound.

Sandoval, says a friend, was in the ring, hanging from the fence. The bull stopped beneath him, reared itself up, and gored him then and there.

Now, Negrete moves to the second wound, in Sandoval's side. As he treats the dark hole, Sandoval's intestines slither out, like pink sausages. Negrete cups the intestines and tries to push them back in, but they won't go. Those peering into the tent gasp at the sudden stench.

"His intestines have been pierced," a nurse shouts.

Sandoval looks straight ahead, away from his wounds. There's terror in his eyes, and his skin grays by the second.

Finally, Negrete bandages the wound, an ugly bulge of the intestines visible under the gauze. Negrete has saved his life, but Sandoval needs surgery if he's going to survive. As the old man is carried to the back of the ambulance, more screams come from the ring. And the music never stops for a second.

AS THE DAYS stretch on, the corralejas take on a dream state. It's where you eat, where [*Cont. on 81*]

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Reviews

Music

KACEY MUSGRAVES DIGS DEEP

One of country's most ambitious artists asks big questions on a muted LP

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN

Kacey Musgraves
Deeper Well
INTERSCOPE/MCA NASHVILLE

FOR THE PAST DECADE, Kacey Musgraves has been country music's most daring traditionalist – a small-town realist who's also a campy country-disco queen and a folkie who once wrote a song about smoking weed with John Prine. Her last LP, the 2021 post-divorce record *Star-Crossed,* was another reminder that her artistic comfort zone is pretty much wherever she lands on any given moment.

On the heels of her biggest hit yet, last year's Zach Bryan duet "I Remember Everything," there were several semi-predictable steps Musgraves might have taken for LP number five: chiming in on the current folk-stomp mania led by her recent duet partners Bryan and ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Sarah Jarrett

KACEY MUSGRAVES

Noah Kahan; returning to the hard-nosed country of her first two albums; taking the bombastic theatrics of *Star-Crossed* even further.

Deeper Well, Musgraves' latest, is none of the above, neither a return to country camp nor a deeper leap into pop spectacle. Instead, it's a rainy-day singer-songwriter record almost entirely devoid of swooping, radio-friendly hooks that revels in the unglamorous gray gloom of self-interrogation. It's another daring swerve, but while she often arrives at genuine moments of beauty, the end result is uneven.

Throughout the LP, Musgraves lays out her past few years of mid-thirties turmoil as an archaeological site to which she has exclusive access, pondering big-picture stuff like grief, the afterlife, and predestination. On "The Architect," a gorgeous acoustic ballad, she ponders life's meaning, and questions free will and God's existence, all in three minutes. On the synth-prayer "Sway," she wonders if she has the strength to surrender to the direction the wind is blowing her.

Musgraves is surely the only artist, country or otherwise, who is making records eclectic enough to crib ancient Scottish folk melodies on one song and interpolate a hook from rapper JID on the next. *Deeper Well* is Musgraves' third effort with Ian Fitchuk and Daniel Tashian, and the hallmarks of their collaboration – processed banjo, vocoder flourishes – can be heard throughout. By and large, the production touches, which risk being a crutch, are much lighter on a record where the songs speak for themselves.

But the second half of *Deeper Well* struggles to maintain momentum with a lack of dynamics and a string of tunes ("Heart of the Woods," "Dinner With Friends," "Anime Eyes") that don't quite hold their own. The sparse vulnerability of the production quickly exposes any imperfections, and some of the material feels more detached than determined.

Contrast that with a highlight like "Giver/Taker," an understated reflection on how much relationships can ask of two people, and a song that bears the fruit of all the digging Musgraves has done. It's not a big-swing statement, just a reminder that sometimes revelations – and career resets – are OK as long as the songs carry their weight.

BLEACHERS' HUNGRY HEART

Jack Antonoff works out his emo-Springsteen side and finds some personal glory By JON DOLAN

JACK ANTONOFF HAS almost single-handedly made modern pop into a glorious safe space, an expansive, sensitive, creative biosphere where the biggest artists in the world – from Taylor to Lana to Lorde – can chase their wildest ambitions and find their most real inner selves while still making blockbuster records. Most A-list superproducers are pop scientists. Antonoff is a pop humanist.

Bleachers

Bleachers

DIRTY HIT

Antonoff (bottom right) and Bleachers

Bleachers is the project where he works out his band side. The three previous Bleachers LPs have highlighted an Eighties-tinged refusal to acknowledge that there should be any distinction between hook-ninja slickness and unrepentant sentimentality, a quality that's also there in Antonoff's mega-pop co-writing.

The fourth, self-titled Bleachers record doesn't veer too far from their previous LPs. Antonoff is an emo kid from New Jersey who worships Bruce Springsteen and is a firm believer in the spiritual ecstasy that can only be attained through the Platonic perfection of pop formula. *Bleachers* opens with Antonoff in low-talking Intimate Bruce mode over surging drums and a U2-size guitarscape, as he sets the LP's warmly nostalgic tone singing, "Future's past/I'm right on time." The Springsteen love really takes off on "Modern Girl," with its Clarence Clemons-like sax blasts, and car-radio-shout-along chorus. Antonoff sings about "modern girls shakin' their ass tonight," updating his retro rock with lyrics about meds and webcams.

He gets lovably personal on the synth-rocker "Jesus Is Dead," as he looks back on his own mid-2000s golden age of DIY tours and hanging out at the New York hipster dance night Misshapes. "I miss it, all the time," he laments, contrasting that indie Eden with the strange vibes these days of feeling like "the man who sold the world." He's similarly wistful on the National-style sad-dad rock of "Isimo" and on the folky "Woke Up Today," where Joni Mitchell acoustic chords back a tale of post-breakup bummedness.

Every element of the Bleachers experience comes together on the album's centerpiece, "Alma Mater." This one has sax magic and Boss mumbling too, but mainly knocks you over by subtraction rather than addition, boiling down the *Born to Run* idealism you hear elsewhere to an elegiac ambiance. Even Lana Del Rey's appearance on the track feels understated. Antonoff sings about listening to Tom Waits as he drives through Jersey looking for the heart of Saturday night. "Fuck Balenciaga/Right past the Wawa," he mutters, slipping into his runaway American dream. His life these days is more Balenciaga than Wawa, but *Bleachers* is a nice reminder of the sweet suburban kid at the heart of his Top 40 win.

BREAKING

The Global Groove of Daymè Arocena

DURING THE PANDEMIC, powerhouse singer Daymè Arocena left her native Cuba, where she'd built a career as a top Latin-jazz vocalist. The move coincided with Arocena's shift toward pop as well, with results that should make her a stateside star. Produced by Eduardo Cabra of the long-standing Puerto Rican alt-hip-hop band Calle 13, her new album, *Alkemi,* is a marvelously electric fusion of sounds, from the R&B elegance of "American Boy" to "Suave y Pegao," a beautiful duet with urbano star Rafa Pabón. It's a must-hear conversation across genres, borders, and eras, gathered together by Arocena's grace and gravity. **JON DOLAN**

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Sawai stars as Toda Mariko, Blackthorne's star-crossed lover.

TV.

'SHŌGUN' IS FX'S 'GAME OF THRONES'

Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks' towering epic about a foreigner in feudal Japan is absolutely stunning

Shogun

NETWORK	Hulu
AIR DATE	New episodes releasing every Tuesday
STARRING	Hiroyuki Sanada Cosmo Jarvis Anna Sawai Tadanobu Asano Shinnosuke Abe Fumi Nikaido

ALAN SEPINWALL

JAMES CLAVELL'S epic historical novel *Shōgun* was first adapted for television back in 1980. It starred Richard Chamberlain as John Blackthorne, an English sailor who gets caught up in a Japanese civil war in the early 1600s, and Japanese-cinema legend Toshirô Mifune as Yoshi Toranaga, a feudal lord at odds with the rest of his country's ruling class. This NBC version did not feature subtitles, so the Japanese dialogue was only translated in scenes where characters were interpreting for Blackthorne. The producers treated Clavell's three-dimensional Japanese characters as exotic supporting players in a white man's story.

The new FX adaptation knows better. The majority of the dialogue is in subtitled Japanese, and it treats Blackthorne (played here by Cosmo Jarvis) and Toranaga (Hiroyuki Sanada) at least as narrative equals, if not making Toranaga the central character.

Adapted by Rachel Kondo and Justin Marks, this new *Shōgun* digs deep into Japanese culture of the period, and the many complicated ways it has shaped Toranaga, Blackthorne's translator, Toda Mariko (Anna Sawai), and everyone else we meet along the way. It is beautiful to look at, operating on a scale much closer to *Game of Thrones* than to anything FX has done in the past.

The story still begins from Blackthorne's point of view, as his damaged ship winds up in a port controlled by Toranaga. He has come to plunder a land populated by, as he puts it, "a savage horde," and is startled to learn that the Japanese consider him a disgusting barbarian. In time, he recognizes the many ways that life in Japan is superior to the world he left behind, like regular bathing. But he also learns that the nationwide dedication to honor at all costs cuts both ways, inspiring great deeds of heroism and sacrifice, but also baffling, at times monstrous behavior when people feel compelled to commit the ritual suicide of seppuku for seemingly minor offenses. Mariko warns John not to be fooled by everyone's polite demeanor, and he slowly recognizes that her own life is a constant struggle due to questions of honor and a woman's role in society.

Sanada is Yoshi Toranaga, a feudal lord.

KATIE YU/FX, 2

The cast is wonderful. Sanada's charisma and intense stillness makes it wholly believable that Toranaga is a brilliant strategist who is always five moves ahead of his many enemies. Sawai speaks volumes with every pained look on Mariko's face. As duplicitous warrior Yabushige, Tadanobu Asano entertainingly channels the *Seven Samurai*-era Mifune. Jarvis' performance is deliberately bigger, but that only underlines how alien he is in this beautiful place.

The Clavell book has epic sweep, which the show takes pains to re-create. There are stunning, massive set pieces, like an earthquake that wrecks one of the armies at an inopportune moment. There's the star-crossed love story between Mariko and Blackthorne, complicated feuds between the various Japanese lords and vassals, interference from Catholic missionaries from Portugal, and more. The series occasionally loses its grip on some threads, but on the whole does a beautiful job of translating this huge story to the screen. It even succeeds at making Mariko's gift for freestyle poetry seem as potent a weapon as the cannons Blackthorne brought from Europe.

Mariko has converted to Catholicism, and is uncomfortable hearing the Protestant Blackthorne curse out the representatives of her faith. Toranaga, who needs her to stay close to this unlikely ally, asks if her loyalty to God would be in conflict with her service to him. Mariko replies that this would be an issue if she were just a Christian, "but I have more than one heart." This *Shōgun* has many hearts, and many points of view, rather than fixating on the simplistic stranger-in-a-strange-land story from the Eighties. It's terrific. ®

[*Cont. from 29*] "What motivated people to vote last time was not Joe Biden," he says. "We were voting against [Trump]. But it's foolish to ask us to do that twice, especially now when we see how dismissive the Democratic Party is to brown and Black life. [People are wondering,] 'What are we voting for if you can ignore us?' That's what's driving more young people to move away from the Democratic Party. A clear majority of us have wanted a cease-fire for months."

MY TIME IN DETROIT felt too much like home. The concerns I heard Detroiters express are the same things I've heard in my native Washington, D.C., and in New York, where I've lived for 11 years. Young people are worried about housing insecurity, food deserts, joblessness, a racist police system, and mountainous student-loan debt. Now, we're worried about Biden's complicity in Israel's violent military action in Gaza.

The best-case scenario for spurring change through electoral politics is to hope the right Democrat gets the party nomination, then hope they get elected, then hope they keep their promises. And even when they introduce radical legislation, they have to persuade enough of Congress not to knock it down just because. And while this wrangling continues on Capitol Hill, there are people in neighborhoods where presidential motorcades don't go who are too worried about how they'll pay rent next month to follow along with debates that don't change their tomorrow. It's an exhausting cycle.

Neither Biden nor Trump's platform does much to change that sentiment, so, what are Detroiters going to do in November? It's still too early to tell. No one I spoke to said they planned on voting for Trump, but no one gave Biden much of an endorsement.

"If I was forced to choose between Biden and Trump, it would be Trump," Vezzo says, though right now he leans toward RFK Jr., the anti-vaxxer who switched from the Democratic Party to an independent run. Kennedy has stoked controversy for saying that "there's no vaccine that is safe and effective," writing in this magazine about childhood vaccines causing autism, and suggesting that Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people are "most immune" to Covid. He's also suggested that "endocrine disruptors" influence "sexual" and "gender" confusion. As a third-party candidate, Kennedy has a remote shot at the White House *without* these absurd claims. But Vezzo says a candidate's practical chance to win the election doesn't affect who he'd vote for.

As for Trump, Vezzo says, "I don't agree with a lot of his ways. He's rude, he says a lot of dumb shit. He doesn't think before he speaks.... He talks so much that we know everything about him. And I think people would rather know their president than not."

It's likely that Democratic delegate Shelby votes for Biden, but he says he's thinking about how to run more inspiring candidates in future elections. "What do we need to do to recruit, develop, and run people who are going to be reflective of our values and build the political infrastructure needed to accomplish those wins?" he asks. "And not just at the highest levels, but from the local levels down to the precinct."

Williams says he's tired of the two-party system and wants people to mobilize a viable third party. "I'm at that point where we were during the Civil War, to run a cabinet," he says. "'Go ahead and bring me Claudia de la Cruz [and] Jill [Stein], put them all on one ticket, and let's carve out the space of the third party. It may not win this time, but it'll prove that a third party is viable and exists. That type of shit has to happen."

Williams says that he knows people who plan to abstain from voting and understands their sentiment: "If you say voting third party or abstaining from voting only elects the right ... I voted Democrat the last time, and as far as I can tell, this motherfucker is [right-wing] as fuck. So voting for the Democrats elects the right, too."

David Parnell feels differently, noting the intent behind their organizing work. "For people who have completely divested from the two-party system and American politics: I literally can't build power with you."

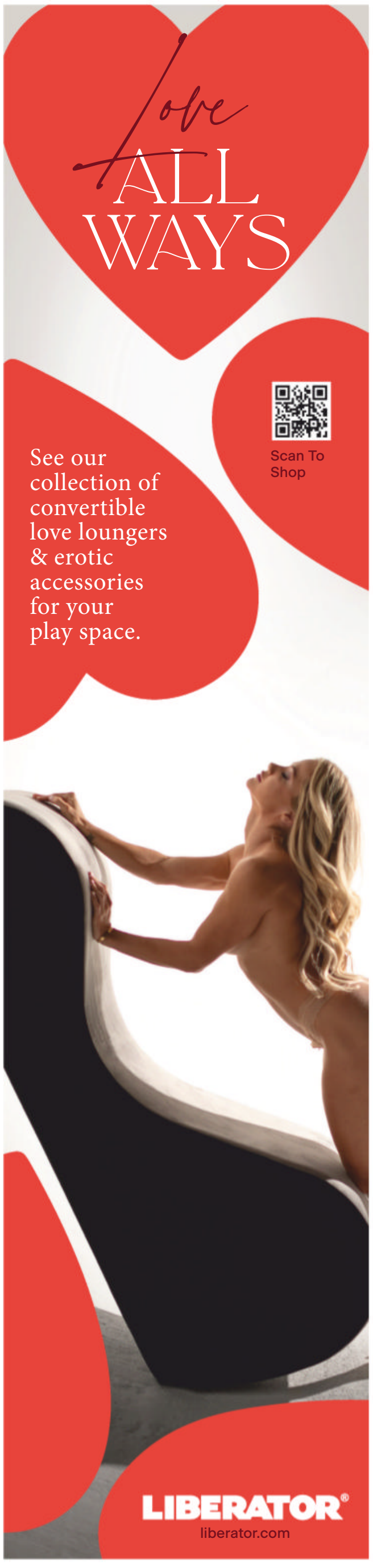
In 2016, Jewell Jones became Michigan's youngest person to be elected as state representative. She thinks Biden should "get out and move around" to engage his Black constituency. "With campaigning, it's about dollars and doors," she says. "Either you spend a lot of money or get in front of a lot of people."

Shelby agrees that Biden and Kamala Harris should make more efforts to show face in the community – and be considerate about it. "I talk with even elected officials and they say, 'How can we get to you? How can we engage more young people?' [I say,] 'First of all, a lot of the times, you're having coffee hours [during times when] people are working. How do you expect people to be engaged?' And they have to think about their priorities, how they're going to eat." He lauds Councilwoman Sheffield's Occupy the Corner events as an example of how a politician can genuinely engage with young people.

In 2013, Sheffield became the youngest councilperson in Detroit history at 26. She says that before pursuing office, she was "disinterested" in electoral politics and created her Occupy the Corner events to meet people where they are. "We go into disenfranchised, underrepresented areas throughout Detroit, and we essentially bring city government to their front doors." They provide services like utility-bill payments, job fairs, record expungement, and tax help. Sheffield works with prominent Detroit figures like Vezzo to ensure that young people will come out.

She credits Biden for "establishing a presence" in Michigan over the past four years, being "instrumental" in helping Detroit get a new fleet of buses, and giving Michigan $826.7 million in American Rescue Plan Act dollars, which she says have been spent on job training and expanding youth-employment program Grow Detroit's Young Talent. Sheffield feels that along with providing more federal funding for housing insecurity, mental-health services, and overall economic opportunity, Biden could ingratiate himself to young Black voters by prioritizing "constant engagement and relationship building with our young people for them to be able to trust you. It's important for him to make the correlation of what they've done and how that impacts the day-to-day life of everyday Detroiters."

Parnell says they're "excited and hopeful for more progressive [candidates]" in the future. But their advice for any candidate remains the same: "Ensure that your campaign will match your presidency, because lack of follow-through has already been the pattern everywhere. No more false promises. People are tired. Ensure that you are expanding the civil rights for everyone across the board and naming those people and bringing those stories to light, because they already feel invisible. Remind them that they're not." ®



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[*Cont. from 65*] boating skills and the human power of nearly every person on the expedition. Lefebvre and geologist Gary Gianniny scramble 200 feet up to a ledge to photograph the slump from above. Bowen, after realizing that the $50,000 GPS unit can't reach enough satellites from the safety of the shore to perform its high-detail mapping, instead sets it up on a deteriorating mud island with another professor to babysit it. She takes the other precision GPS unit (also expensive) and dangles it from a pole midair above the water as one of the boaters motors upriver through hazardous hydraulics in order to map the perimeter of the slump. The batteries on both devices are running out as quickly as the daylight.

DeHoff guides another contingent, that includes Fiebig and Flynn, across the river to hike up collapsing sediment to survey the top of the towering slump. One person loses their footing and falls hip-deep into a crevasse (a lucky stop, as the dark chasm appears to extend much farther down), but it's worth it for what they find.

Old records tell of a hot spring that used to be here, but no one's seen it for 50 years. Now it's re-emerged to create a lake on top of the Space Slump. Bowen believes this change in landscape is what caused the great mass to collapse in July: In concert with the river eroding from one side, spring water weakened it from the other. The spring will eventually weigh the lake with so much water that it will collapse the sediment entirely, and the river will take it from there. Eventually this particular stretch will be fully scoured of backed-up sediment as the Colorado River rushes back to its natural state.

Which presents the inevitable question: If the river is this capable of restoring itself after being drowned, why not just keep refilling Lake Powell when we can during high-water years to mitigate climate-induced drought? Why couldn't it keep fixing itself again and again?

"Because of extinction," riparian ecologist Cynthia Dott says succinctly. There's no guarantee that the native plants and animals recolonizing the banks during this first resurfacing will survive a second drowning, let alone repeated drainings and drownings. "Once a species' habitat is so destroyed by human activities that it can't survive anymore, it's gone forever," Dott adds.

WE'VE FLOATED OUT of Cataract Canyon into the current reservoir boundary; gone is the sound of rushing river, and the water's color has changed from brick to pale green as sediment drops out. This is where the river dies – it's an emotional place for DeHoff and Flynn. They pull the raft up to a soupy mud bank. This spot was 50 feet underwater earlier this summer as the reservoir refilled after a wet spring, flooding landscapes that had come up for air over the past few years. It had drained as the reservoir dropped, and was drowned again to refill Lake Powell.

"It was river as far as the eye could see here last year," DeHoff says sadly.

We step up to a huge boulder. Carved on it is the looping inscription of a name: Powell. That is Major John Wesley Powell, from the first expedition of white people to map the remote reaches of the Colorado River, in 1869. The faded letters are difficult to see, eroded with repeated submersion. If we keep letting the reservoir drop and refill, this historic carving will go the way of the thousand-year-old fort a stone's throw from here.

When the reservoir receded in 2004 to reveal the site of the fort for the first time since Lake Powell filled, the square 25-foot-high stone structure had been reduced to a pile of rocks by the weight of water. Last year, when the site emerged again at low water, the ancient fort was gone completely. The Bureau of Reclamation recommends keeping drowned cultural and historic resources underwater as the best way to protect them from over-visitation, vandalism, and wave action. But it's already too late for these disappearing pieces of the past at the shifting boundaries of the reservoir.

"Returning Rapids does a lot of work to make sure this stretch where so few people come is seen," Flynn says. Most people rafting Cataract Canyon take out upstream of here – including recreationists and agency staff – and few Lake Powell users make it as far as these upper reaches. "We have to be able to recognize and own the harm perpetrated," she adds, "so that we as a culture or nation decide to make positive change."

We motor on. The water turns a clear blue against red walls, an unnatural juxtaposition of desert landscape. We're in the flooded reach of Glen Canyon. Here in what venerated nature writer Edward Abbey once called "a portion of Earth's original paradise,"

"Returning Rapids does a lot of work to make sure this stretch where so few people come is seen," says Meg Flynn. "We have to be able to recognize and own the harm perpetrated, so that we as a culture or nation decide to make positive change."

the water-stained walls are crumbling. Repeated inundation has weakened the sandstone, DeHoff explains, causing the rock to collapse in places. At a sheer cliff face known as the Tapestry Wall, DeHoff cuts the motor. He and Flynn climb out to stand on a sandstone ledge that, half a century ago, soared nearly 200 feet above the river. Reservoir water laps at their feet.

Cataract's rebirth miles upstream from this spot, where the scale of the dam's impact is still so apparent, keeps DeHoff and Flynn grounded in their mission. And it turns out that what's happening in Cataract isn't isolated.

Side canyons all over Glen are restoring themselves as the reservoir drops. Much like a small group of river runners with the potential to help shift the course of this river's future – and in turn catalyze a shift toward sustainability in the West's politicized water wars – nature might yet hold some surprising power over the seemingly overwhelming forces of the Anthropocene.

As we motor away from the Tapestry Wall, Flynn gazes back at the ledge. "One day we'll look up from the river and think, 'Remember when we stood up there?'" ®

‘LIKE I’M DANCING WITH DEATH’

[*Cont. from 73*] you see your friends, where you dance and listen to music, where you drink rum until you fall asleep, wake up and do it again. A dark party that never ends. One night, I dream of charging bulls.

“When you live in this world, it traps you – it’s a spell,” says Saltarin. “You don’t focus on the dead, you look away, you look at the people having a good time.... And the party never stops, it keeps going.”

The Death calls it the “devil’s party,” a dark carnival you can never leave. “The money you make here is cursed, only meant to be spent drinking rum.”

For some, it becomes a vortex impossible to escape from. The last time I saw Catalino, the man who jumps over the bull, he was bathing his baby daughter in his house and thinking on retiring from the sport. “I’ve been thinking I’m giving away my life for nothing,” he said. “I have to think ‘How can I help my baby if I’m dead?’ ”

Catalino would quickly spiral out of control. The constant rum led him to harder drugs. The money made risking his life in the ring went to feed his addiction. The star of the corralejas fell to living on the streets, cut off from his family. Someone posted his photo on Facebook looking for any friends and family to help him. Catalino stands there in filthy clothes, a man lost to addiction, demons now in control.

Some try to plan an exit from the corralejas, to not let the arena win. Mandarina is one of the legends of the sport. “In bullfighting,” he says, “you want to leave this in the best way possible, leaving behind the best image of yourself.” He’s instantly recognizable for his black shoulder-length curly hair, a deep scar that cuts along his jaw, ending at his lips, a memento of the afternoon when the bull got too close. Among the rough Suicide Men, Mandarina is a gentleman, nicely turned out – jeans, a shirt, white sneakers (the nickname comes from a childhood job of selling the fruit on the street). For nearly 20 years, Mandarina and Saltarin have traveled together, brothers in the corralejas. But the deaths of the bullfighters haunt him.

“Death is hard to take. To see a friend die, gored by the bull, that’s when you feel the fear. Just as it happened to him, it could happen to you,” he says, thoughtful. “In this moment, I’ve got a touch of this fear in me. When you face off against the bull and you feel the fear, you really know fear.”

Mandarina thinks on his family: his young daughter and son. “I’ve set up a little farm, so when I retire from the corralejas, I’ll have something,” he tells me. “I don’t know when that’s going to happen because I’m still young.”

Mandarina is one of the few who you can imagine in a life beyond the rum, meeting death in a bed at a ripe old age, far from a rampaging bull’s horns.

And I wish the story had ended that way.

On the first afternoon of the corralejas in the town of Planeta Rica, in a hellish heat, Mandarina works the ring. Saltarin is in the stands, a bad feeling telling him to skip the bulls that day. “I told Mandarina not to work that afternoon. I was watching in the stands ...” and he runs out of words.

The bull charges out of the metal door, dark brown, 400 kilos of mass on a mission to destroy. A bullfighter tries to work the cape, but the bull charges right past him and lands heavy into Mandarina’s chest. He’s flipped in the air, landing on his back. The bull curves around, his head lowered, horns at the attack – and repeatedly stabs Mandarina, shoving him across the ring until he’s pinned against the fence. The audience screams in horror. Mandarina is dead at 47.

In between the corralejas, to raise a little extra money, Mandarina was working as a motorcycle taxi. One life where he’s a star in the ring, adored by tens of thousands, and another life where he ferries people around on the back of his bike for 50 cents a trip.

Mandarina was buried with honors in his hometown, hundreds lining the streets to say goodbye as bullfighters and bands marched in the funeral procession. One swirls Mandarina’s cape around for a final twirl. And then he is buried amid music and tears.

A few months later, Saltarin would lose another companion in the corralejas, “El Mono Villegas,” one more death in the afternoon.

“I thought about retirement after losing two friends. I was going to retire,” Saltarin says, a tear rolling down his cheek. “I said that I was leaving. No one accepted it. They insulted me. They called me a coward.” Rising, he gives me a fist bump and walks off.

When I catch up with him a few months later, he tells me he’s quit. “I want to change my life. I’ve left the corralejas,” he says. “Almost all my friends have become memories. I don’t want to become a memory, Toby.”

I feel relief. I had been haunted by my last memories of him at the corralejas: walking by himself after drinking with friends. He seemed alone in the world, knowing that soon another bottle of rum will be opened, the big metal door will swing wide, and a bull will charge out as a man steps forward, risking all to give the audience another show.

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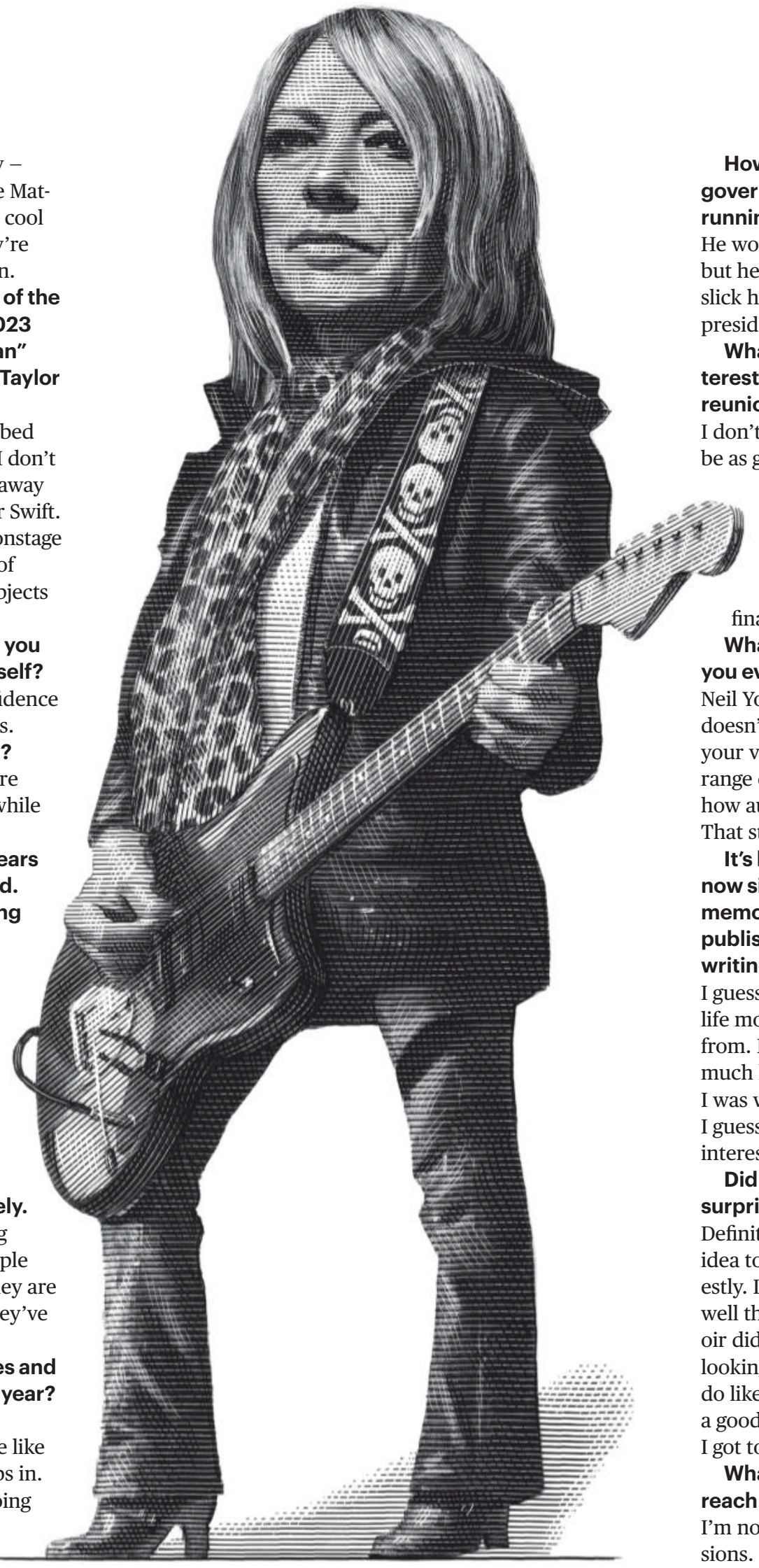
Kim Gordon

On 'Barbie,' Kurt Cobain, and the presidential election



You moved back to your native state of California after Sonic Youth's breakup. How do you fit in there? Do you hike, for instance?
I'm not a hiker. I like my house. There's so much driving. But visually it's always been one of my favorite places. Just to look at the houses, the architecture … you can still feel the Seventies here.

Kim Gordon's new solo album, 'The Collective,' is out March 8.

You've put out two electronic-leaning solo albums. What have you learned about yourself that way?
That I worry a lot. I never really thought of myself as a musician. I still think of myself more as a visual artist who plays music. I still don't know chords and things like that. But I have realized that I do know some things about music and performing. It's kind of embedded in me and seems to activate at the right time. Even before [Sonic Youth ended], I thought, "Oh, by the time I'm 40 – that's too old to be doing this." But it's a lifestyle, like blues or jazz players who play all their life.

What's the last piece of art that moved you?
I saw some amazing movies, if that qualifies as art. *Zone of Interest* was brilliant.

What about *Barbie*?
I liked it. I had the original Barbie in 1959. It didn't bother me that the movie used that platform to go on this feminist rant. I liked Ken discovering the patriarchy – that was funny. It made Mattel seem like they were cool or something, and they're really just a corporation.

What did you make of the media proclaiming 2023 the "year of the woman" thanks to that movie, Taylor Swift, and Beyoncé?
I've also heard it described as the year of the doll. I don't mean to take anything away from Beyoncé or Taylor Swift. But the way they look onstage is kind of unreal. Both of them are these shiny objects of perfection.

What advice would you give to your younger self?
To have more self-confidence and not to be so serious.

What do you regret?
That I didn't spend more time with my parents while they were alive.

We're nearing 30 years since Kurt Cobain died. What are your enduring memories of him?
That is hard to believe, but it makes sense. My daughter was born that year and she's 29 now. I still have very vivid images of him laughing, smiling, and goofing around.

Nirvana merchandise is selling well lately.
It cracks me up walking around and seeing people wearing that. Maybe they are into Nirvana. Maybe they've never heard of them!

What are your hopes and fears for this election year?
My hope is that Biden drops out and someone like Gretchen Whitmer steps in. My fear is that we're going to have Trump and Biden again.

How about your own governor, Gavin Newsom, running?
He wouldn't be the worst, but he would have to deslick himself if he wants to be president. Change the hair.

What would it take to interest you in a Sonic Youth reunion show or tour?
I don't know. It would never be as good as it was.

What did you think of Thurston Moore's memoir?
I haven't read it. I'm happy for him that he's finally got it out there.

What's the best advice you ever got?
Neil Young told me that it doesn't matter how good your voice is, in terms of range or whatever. It's about how authentic it sounds. That stuck with me.

It's been nearly 10 years now since your bestselling memoir, *Girl in a Band*, was published. What impact did writing it have on you?
I guess I thought about my life more: where I came from. I've always felt pretty much like the same person I was when I was, like, five. I guess it made people more interested in me.

Did the book's success surprise you?
Definitely, yeah. It wasn't my idea to write a memoir, honestly. I think people saw how well the Patti Smith memoir did, so they were kind of looking around. I thought, "I do like to write. Maybe this is a good time to figure out how I got to where I am."

What conclusion did you reach on that?
I'm not a believer in conclusions. **DAVID BROWNE**

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